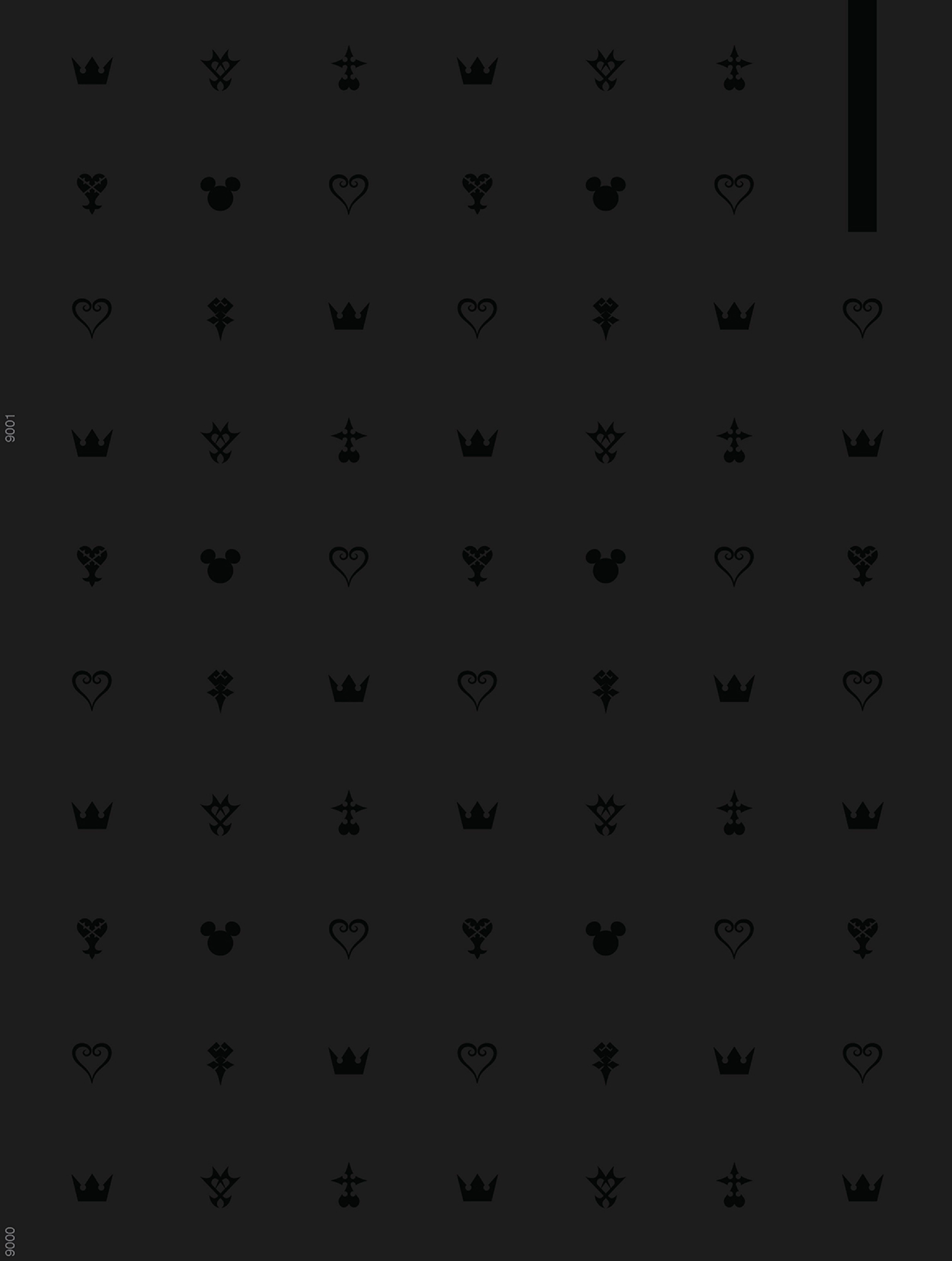



EDGE
THE FUTURE OF INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT
#328
FEBUARY 2019



Are we in this thing alone, or are we in it together?



Exclusive subscriber edition

The theme of the 2010s in videogames has been one of separation; of the magic that can happen when developers choose their own adventures, turning their backs on big publishers and striking out on their own. Many of the biggest games of the decade have been born not in the boardroom but the bedroom, made free from corporate interference and finding success through hard work and word of mouth.

Yet with the decade running down, perhaps that is changing. Maybe it's a coincidence, but the first **Edge** of 2019 is characterised by the spirit of collaboration; of creatives working together to reach some higher plane, instead of standing alone. In Hype, we check in on the new game from Simogo. It is one of **Edge**'s favourite developers, the maker of some of the finest games ever to grace the App Store. But mobile's a tough gig for a small Swedish indie. Its new game, to be released for Switch through arthouse publisher Annapurna, looks like finally finding the audience the studio has long deserved.

In Knowledge, we pull back the curtain on Private Division, a new publishing label set up by Take Two. Its business model is finding cool concepts with lofty goals, made by small teams to mid-sized budgets, and providing the support they need, not only in finance and logistics but on the dev side too, to help bring their ideas to life.

Yet nowhere is the spirit of collaboration made more clear than it is in our cover story. *Kingdom Hearts* began, famously, in a lift: Square shared an office building with Disney's Japanese HQ, and one morning a collaboration was suggested. These days, things are somewhat more protracted. *Kingdom Hearts III* has been in development for over a decade. It is the work of two very different creative companies, each working to exacting standards, passing their work back and forth and finessing it into something worthy of both their names. It's a recipe for disaster, really, yet it's somehow (almost) here. Our story begins on p56.





games

Hype

Play

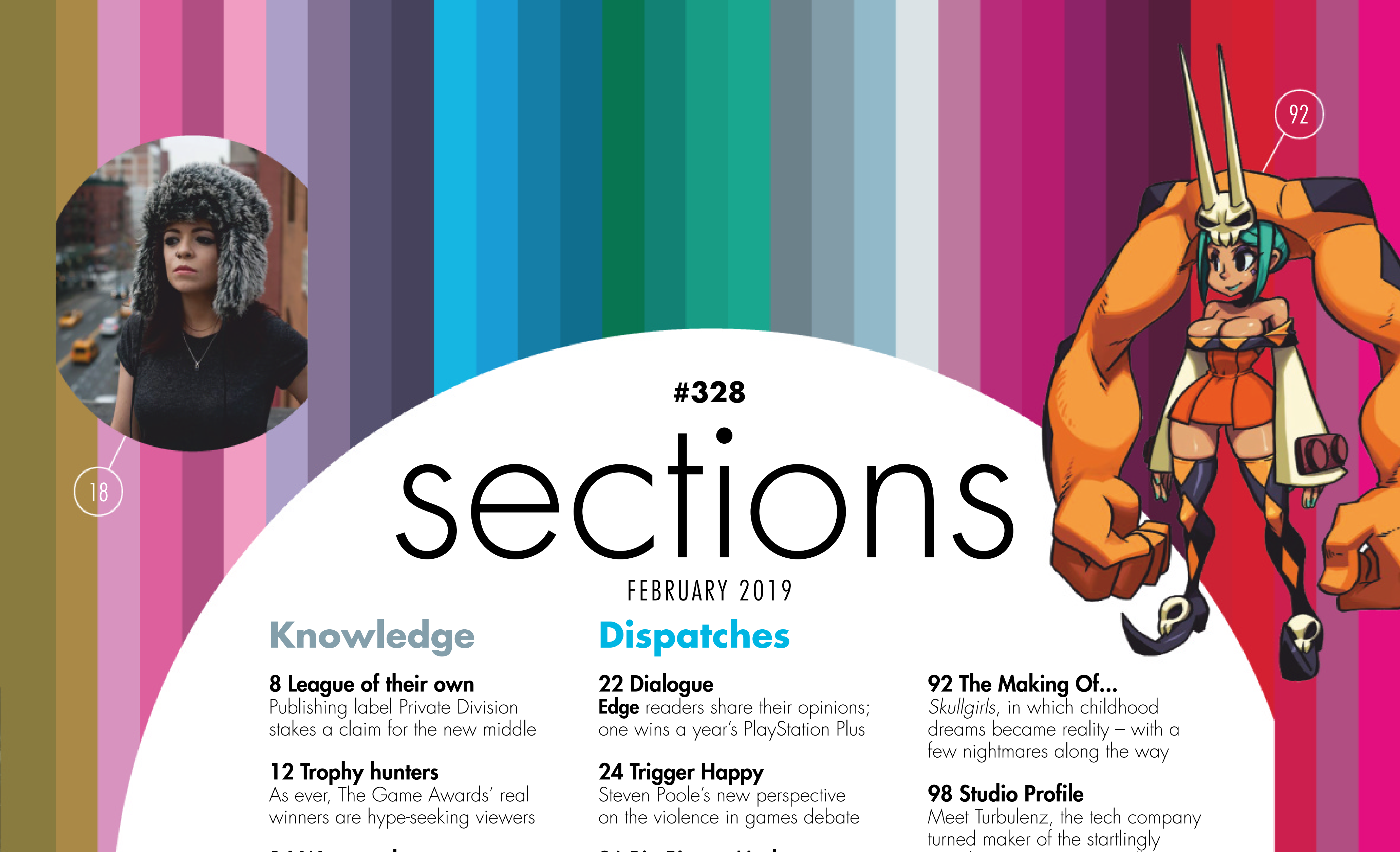
50



Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for additional content



Follow these links throughout the magazine for more content online



#328

sections

FEBRUARY 2019

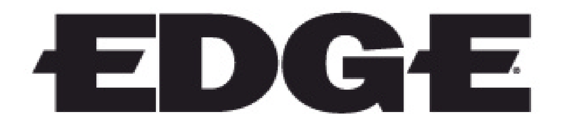
Knowledge

Dispatches

Features

56

72



EDITORIAL
Nathan Brown editor
Jen Simpkins deputy editor
Andrew Hind art editor
Miriam McDonald operations editor

CONTRIBUTORS
Edwin Evans-Thirlwell, Georgine Hodsdon, Alex Hutchinson, Phil Iwaniuk, Cliff Newman, Emmanuel Pajon, Steven Poole, Chris Schilling, Alex Spencer, Alex Wiltshire

SPECIAL THANKS
Ian Dickson, Amy Hughes, Allen Murray, Chris Thursten

ADVERTISING
Clare Dove commercial sales director
Kevin Stoddart account manager (+44 (0) 1225 687455 kevin.stoddart@futurenet.com)

CONTACT US
+44 (0)1225 442244 edge@futurenet.com

SUBSCRIPTIONS
Web www.myfavouritemagazines.com
Email contact@myfavouritemagazines.co.uk
Telephone 0344 848 2852
International +44 (0) 344 848 2852

CIRCULATION
Tim Mathers head of newstrade +44 (0) 1202 586200

PRODUCTION
Mark Constance head of production US & UK **Clare Scott** production project manager **Hollie Dowse** advertising production manager
Jason Hudson digital editions controller **Nola Cokely** production manager

MANAGEMENT
Aaron Asadi chief operating officer **Paul Newman** group content director
Tony Mott brand director **Warren Brown** senior art editor
Rodney Dive head of art & design **Dan Jotcham** commercial finance director

Printed in the UK by William Gibbons & Sons on behalf of Future. Distributed by Marketforce, 2nd Floor, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London E14 5HU.

Edge is available for licensing. To discuss partnership opportunities, contact head of licensing Rachel Shaw on licensing@futurenet.com.

Want to work for Future? Visit www.futurenet.com/careers

Future, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA United Kingdom



We are committed to only using magazine paper which is derived from responsibly managed, certified forestry and chlorine-free manufacture. The paper in this magazine was sourced and produced from sustainable managed forests, conforming to strict environmental and socioeconomic standards. The manufacturing paper mill holds full FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) certification and accreditation




GROW YOUR WORLDWIDE
GAMING BUSINESS
Launch, monetize, and scale globally, with the only all-in-one business engine made just for gaming, including: PAY STATION, PARTNER NETWORK, SITE BUILDER, LAUNCHER, LOGIN.

League of their own

How Private Division is staking a claim for 'the new middle' with two of 2019's most adventurous new games

You don't hear so much talk about the so-called 'squeezed middle' these days. Sure, between bedrooms and blockbusters can still be a risky place to be: a no-man's-land where mid-tier games struggle to gain traction, lacking the development and marketing budgets to compete with the big boys, and with overheads higher than indie teams who don't need millions of sales to stay in business. And yet that niche seems to be widening. The recent spate of Japanese hits is testament to that, and as the ambitions of successful indies grow, and as high-profile developers leave major franchises to pursue smaller-scale projects, a new wave of publishers is stepping in to help these studios realise their visions.

Enter Private Division. Conceived by Take Two 's Michael Worosz and Ed Tomaszewski, the subsidiary's existence was officially announced just over a year ago, in December 2017. But by then it had already been in operation for two years. **Allen Murray**, an industry veteran with experience at Bungie and PopCap, among others, recalls first meeting with the two in 2015, as the indie studio he'd been running, AtomJack, was shuttered. "When I let them know about the decision to close down, the conversation shifted to, 'Well, we actually need some help to get this new initiative off the ground.'" Murray tells us. "Over a period of months we found that we had a lot in common and I came on board towards the end of the year. Essentially I was employee number one for the label."

Technically, Private Division's first game was *Kerbal Space Program*, though Squad's widely admired space-science sim is something of an anomaly among the new publisher's portfolio, being an already released game that was subsequently bought by its parent company. Still, Private Division was responsible for the Enhanced Edition that launched on consoles in early 2018. "Just looking around at where that IP and the management of it might lie, it made a lot of sense that it would fit in Private Division. It also helped that our head of business development, Ed Tomaszewski, was the one that really spearheaded that acquisition." And Murray suggests its journey is far from over: "It's a wonderful franchise that we think could grow a lot more."

It was, in other words, the right size: at the lower end of the Goldilocks zone between the smallest of indies and the kind of game that Take Two would normally publish. "There are actually quite a lot of developers that want to enter into this space," Murray says. So what to call it? "We still haven't quite figured out a name for it yet," he says, frowning at the idea of popular buzzwords like 'double-A' or 'triple-I'. "I just tell people it's kind of a 'new middle'." Though it's not really a new sector, is it? "Yeah, it's been around for a while. But a lot of people are now coming back into it and seeing there can be a viable business there."

People such as **Patrice Désilets**, for example, whose thirdperson prehistoric survival adventure *Ancestors: The Humankind Odyssey* will be published by Private Division this year. Or **Tim Cain** and **Leonard Boyarsky**, the *Fallout* creators who are making sci-fi RPG *The Outer Worlds* at Obsidian, also due in 2019. Both are passion projects from veteran developers, though it's not what they have in common that made it the right decision to reveal them both on the same day. "One of the things we like about announcing these two together is that they're *so* different," Murray says. "Both will have very different marketing and PR plans to really highlight the kind of games that they are."

> The publisher tailors its approach to the very different types and scales of games with which it plans to work

Indeed, the publisher is particularly keen to be adaptable, tailoring its approach so that it's appropriate to the very different types and scales of games and developers with which it plans to work. Even a game's marketing will be guided somewhat by the studio itself, though one rule is that both marketing and PR are included from day one of discussions. "There may not be a lot to talk about in terms of actions to take, but they're sitting on the calls, listening and learning," Murray explains. "And so months later when it *is* time to get more involved, they've been a part of that conversation. They have those relationships, so they really understand the game well."

And it seems the understanding is mutual. Désilets' Montreal-based startup, Panache Digital, was brand new when it started working with Private Division. In fact, the studio hadn't even been built ▶

APART TOGETHER
Private Division is, perhaps fittingly, split between four locations. A team of producers and project managers is based in Seattle, where the day-to-day work with its developers takes place. At Take Two's New York headquarters are its business development, PR and marketing departments, with the international versions of the latter based in Munich. Finally, in Las Vegas, it has a QA team of just under 60 people, though Murray says that will fluctuate depending on its ongoing workload. "One of the things we want to be able to offer our developers is dedicated resources. You get producers, marketers and PR people dedicated to you, your studio and your project as well as QA and other technical resources." For the time being, there are no plans to grow much larger, he says. "We also want be mindful of our own costs, so our team is pretty lean, all things considered."



Private Division signed *The Outer Worlds* in 2016. Boyarsky says the team were "very enthusiastic about making the game that *we* wanted to make"






FROM TOP **Allen Murray, Private Division's head of production and executive producer; Patrice Désilets, creative director of *Ancestors: The Humankind Odyssey*; Leonard Boyarsky and Tim Cain, co-directors of *The Outer Worlds***

yet. "The physical space was still under construction," Désilets tells us. "Panache was six people at the time, but they were really interested in working with me. It was clear to me what they wanted to build, which was a neat space for people like me to express themselves, basically – giving me the means to come up with the playable game of my initial vision." Désilets was impressed by a rather less formal approach than that to which he'd become accustomed. "When you start a discussion with a partner, you know it's going to be hard because right away you talk about legal and whatnot. This was just like, 'Oh, let's have a nice lunch, we'll have some fun and then see if business can happen."



The publisher is working with original developer Squad to keep *Kerbal Space Program* updated. Following the Enhanced Edition on consoles, it launched the first official expansion, Making History, in March 2018

Panache has since grown to more than 30 people, and it's a similar deal with V1 Interactive, the studio formed by *Halo*'s creative art director Marcus Lehto, now going it alone after 15 years at Bungie. "It was just him and a partner when we started working with them; they didn't even have an office or anything," Murray says. "So some of our first milestones were just helping them find an office and get computers and desks."

At the other end of the scale are established studios like Obsidian, where such concerns are firmly in their past, but which still needs a publisher that will respect its ideas. Cain and Boyarsky, who worked together on the original *Fallout*, have teamed up again for *The Outer Worlds*, a reactive, systems-led sci-fi RPG whose complex, interlocking systems are capable of throwing up innumerable variables. As a result, Obsidian has relied heavily upon Private Division's QA team, with a group of testers dedicated specifically to playing new builds of the game. Cain is effusive in his praise for the publisher's efforts. "They've been wonderful," he says. "Everybody there understands what we're trying to make and they help us do that. They have this QA team who we've been sending game drops to along with test planets because this game has a *lot* of ways you can play it. And they've been really good at testing all the different paths and coming back and telling us what worked and what didn't." Boyarsky agrees. "It's been great. Sometimes when you're dealing with thirdparties and other publishers, they see something in your game that's not the game you're making, and they want to take a different direction. But Private Division really seemed to grasp what we wanted to do, and were very excited about it."

That excitement is important to Murray. In its early days, before Private Division had even been named, he described his team's approach as 'light touch' to developers. This was down to his past experiences making games, having worked with larger publishers who would embed dozens of people within a team. This didn't fit with his personal philosophy, but he also knew he didn't have the resources to do that either. And yet over time, the publisher has evolved, so now each game has its own "internal champion", in Murray's words: someone dedicated to individual games that can become more deeply involved and function as more of a partner, as opposed to a more orthodox developer-publisher relationship. In determining how roles are assigned, he says, it's down to a blend of personality and passion. Kari Toyama, for example, with whom Murray worked for more a decade at Bungie and PopCap, is now the producer of *Ancestors*. "That's because when she saw the game she just said, 'I love it'," he says. "I brought her out to meet Patrice and she loved the team and so I asked if she wanted to work on it. I want to find people on the team that can champion these games and really understand the developer and work closely with them."

"We know what it's like to come in with your idea – your baby – and say, 'Here. Here's what I'm thinking'"

If Murray can afford to be picky about the games Private Division publishes, he's also keen to try to find a home for those he turns down. If a project is too small, he's only too happy to recommend them to others. Too big, and there's a chance he might well talk to his colleagues at 2K. The decision usually comes down to a single question: "Would we be able to support them in the way that they would need to be supported? I don't want to sign up to fail, so yeah, we're very conscious of that." And yes, of course, weighing creativity against commercial prospects is a vital part of the equation. "I mean, let's be transparent. We are a game publisher, so the end goal is that we can make some money for ourselves and the developers. We definitely look for commercial products and sometimes I have very frank conversations with people about that."

***The Outer Worlds* announcement had fortuitous timing – after *Fallout 76*'s poor start, an RPG from the co-creators of the 1997 original is just what the doctor ordered**



***Ancestors: The Humankind Odyssey* offers a twist on the open-world survival game, with no crafting or minimap**

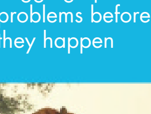
Yet for all that it's hoping for hits, at the heart of Private Division is a love of games and a desire to help developers' dreams come to fruition. "We can really say we've sat in that chair and we know what it's like to come in with your idea – your baby – and say, 'Here. Here's what I'm thinking,'" he says. "I know from my point of view there isn't a single meeting I have with a developer where I'm not really appreciative that they even have the courage to do this, and that they're talking to us. It's a privilege for us to be there. I'm always really excited by that." ■

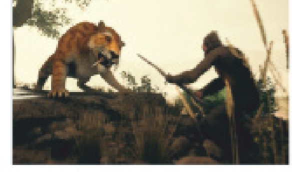


Bungie veteran Marcus Lehto suggests the first screen of his game with Redmond-based studio V1 Interactive is hiding clues, though Private Division isn't ready to reveal more yet

PD CUES

The art of flagging up problems before they happen





The publisher's assistance goes beyond dev support, particularly for new startups. As much as anything, Murray says, it's important to relieve the pressure on the studio, even if it's simply asking questions to nudge them in the right direction. "Do you have a good business partner? Who's doing payroll? Do you have a good tax accountant? We poke at them like that and say, 'Make sure you go and find those people because this is stuff that's going to take up energy.' Because if you're an artist we would rather have you making art than figuring out your taxes." His experiences have taught him a studio needs time and space. "We try to give them the freedom to just create and be along for the ride, and then help guide them when we see some problem down the road."

Trophy hunters

Once again, the real winners at The Game Awards are the viewers who tune in for a slew of new announcements

We are starting to understand why Sony is skipping E3 next year. **Geoff Keighley**'s The Game Awards project is five years old now, and has grown in stature to a point where it rivals the world's biggest videogame event for new announcements. Prior to this year's event, the 2019 release calendar was looking a little sparse. Now Keighley has shown his hand, what looked like a troubling transitional year at the fag-end of a generation now appears to be a cracker. In half a decade Keighley has, in effect, built a December version of E3.

A key element to the show's appeal is that it is platform-agnostic, so largely free of the marketing bluster that characterises a platform holder or big publisher's E3 conference. And since it is also an awards show, it can be positioned as a celebration of games, past, present and future. This was presumably the thinking behind an opening address delivered by PlayStation's Shawn Layden, Xbox's Phil Spencer and Nintendo's Reggie Fils-Aimé, all sharing a stage for the first time and taking turns to eulogise the medium and those who define and consume it. It was always going to be awkward, and it certainly was, as three millionaires took turns to say how great it is that people buy games. But you have to admire the intent – and the ability to make it happen.

Despite the name, the awards themselves are something of a sideshow for the majority of those viewing (in the interests of disclosure, **Edge** is part of the judging panel). While Keighley and team want the event to be thought of as the Oscars of videogames, the new-game announcements are the draw, and the reason it is livestreamed to an audience of millions. The latter couldn't help but undermine the former, meaning a chunk of categories were relegated off the main stage, either to the pre-show livestream or to segments where Keighley rattled through a few winners after one of many developer interviews. That's preferable to the whole thing taking all night, certainly. And other awards shows do similar with perceivably less important categories. But it did reinforce the feeling that, for all the talk of celebrating the year's best, the evening was really about what is coming in 2019 and beyond.

For all the talk of celebrating the year's best, the evening was really about what is coming in 2019

And there are some belters in the works. **Edge** readers will already know about the first signings from Private Division, the new 2K publishing label roaring out of the blocks with new games from the creators of *Fallout* and *Assassin's Creed*. Readers of Alex Hutchinson's column in these pages finally laid eyes on his studio Typhoon's debut game, light-hearted sci-fi adventure *Journey To The Savage Planet*. There were big names, such as Ubisoft's *Far Cry New Dawn* and Hello Games' *The Last Campfire* – but the spotlight was also afforded to smaller studios. Simogo has long deserved a stage of this size, and thanks to new publisher Annapurna Interactive it got one for the Switch exclusive *Sayonara Wild Hearts*.

Arguably the headline showing was Epic Games, which in addition to hoovering up a mass of awards for *Fortnite* unveiled its PC game storefront. Announced a few days before the show, it offers developers far more favourable terms than the 30 per cent taken by Steam. It's long been the industry-standard revenue deal, in fairness, but it's obvious who Epic is trying to undercut by asking for 12 per cent of sales. With 200 million *Fortnite* users already using Epic's launcher, it was off to a flyer even before it announced the first wave of games. Supergiant's action Roguelike *Hades* is an Epic store exclusive, insta-launching into Early Access; Annapurna's *Dark Souls* homage *Ashen* is there too, and beloved PlayStation exclusive *Journey* will follow.



***Fortnite* aside, the** night's big award winner was *God Of War*, which was named Game Of The Year. Earlier, Christopher Judge and Alastair Duncan, the voices behind Kratos and son Atreus, delivered the best gag of the night when the former told the latter to announce a winner with the line, "Read it, boy". The awards side of the show hardly lacked for star power, though it frequently felt incongruous. The Russo brothers gave an award to *Fortnite*, to the delight of Epic's Donald Mustard; Christoph Waltz was there too, with a somewhat implausible joke about mouse-and-keyboard controls ("I'm just saying, aim assist is dumb"). Jonah Hill eulogised Woody Jackson. And if there was a weirder sight in 2018 than two members of Weezer introducing a live performance of *Devil May Cry 5*'s power-metal trailer anthem Devil Trigger, well, no, there wasn't, was there.

Yet weirdest of all, it worked. Keighley's positioning the night as a celebration of games, and the people that make, play and sell them, meant that nothing felt out of place. Everything, however weird, awkward, regrettable or brilliant, had a natural home in an event designed to celebrate an industry that is all of those things, and more besides. ■

One of the more charming aspects of all the glitz is that devs are rarely comfortable on stage. The *Celeste* team couldn't wait to get off it

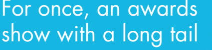






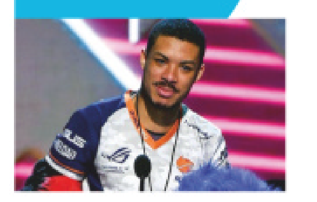


CLOWCKWISE FROM ABOVE **SIE Santa Monica takes the GOTY prize; Jonah Hill, presenter of the Industry Icon award; live music from *RDR2*; a trifecta of platform-holder executive muscle**



MODEL CITIZENS

For once, an awards show with a long tail



Amid the celebration of consumer capitalism were moments of heart. Matt Thorson's acceptance speech for *Celeste*, which won Best Independent Game, was a tribute to sufferers of mental illness. The night was interspersed with a mini-documentary series, Global Gaming Citizens, shining a light on people making and playing games against the odds. Yet the biggest tug of the heartstrings came from Dominique 'SonicFox' McLean, who accepted an esports award in full furry get-up. "I'm black, gay and a furry – everything a Republican hates," he said. "And the best esports player of the whole year, I guess."

WARM WELCOME

The sepia tones of this quiet, gentle goat-farming sim help tell an intimate story of life and loss that will linger in the memory

There's a wonderfully inviting air to *The Stillness Of The Wind*. You're put in the shoes of elderly goat farmer Talma as she goes about her daily business on her isolated homestead. Leaves blow through golden fields, where animals graze contentedly. "It was important for me to make this feel warm and welcoming, in order to create a place that people wanted to be and for the player to instantly settle in," creator **Coyan Cardenas** says. Characters come and go as you tend to your farm, bringing you tidings from your family in the city. The life sim is the ideal genre to tell a more personal, intimate story, Cardenas says. "Peeking through a window to catch a glimpse of a quiet day in the life of someone, especially if they live in a different world, is something I think videogames as a medium are perfect for exploring. Asking the player to enact their daily routine, live inside their skin a while, seems to me to be the ideal way to build empathy for a character."

Indeed, your simple little life doesn't stay that way for long, trouble brewing in the watercolour skies above. "As the narrative develops, things aren't as cheerful and quaint as they first seem," Cardenas says. "Things get tough, resulting in a meta-nostalgia for how things were – a kind of literal manifestation of 'golden memories'." A brief period of rural bliss followed by a heart-wrenching tale, *The Stillness Of The Wind* will release on PC 'when the goats are ready', apparently. ■

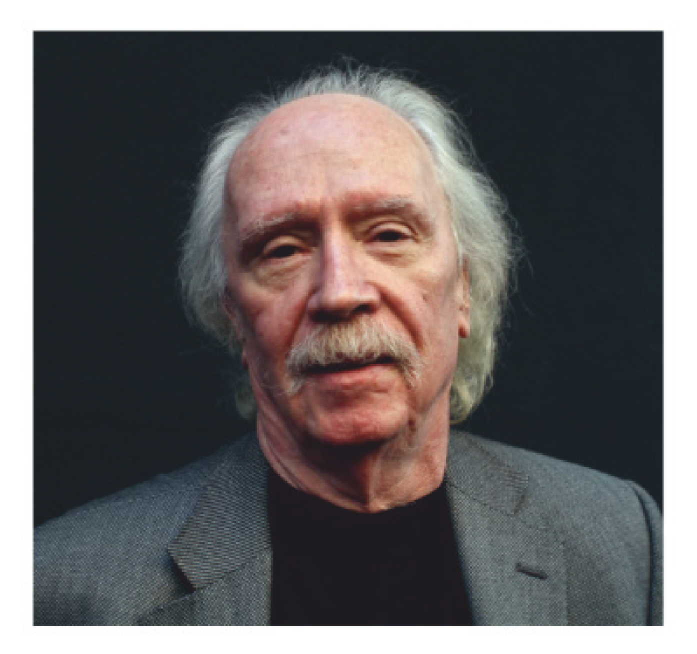




The game is an evolution of Cardenas' month-long solo project *Where The Goats Are*, for which he "went with an art style that was manageable, which resulted in a simplistic style with few colours"

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"*Fallout 76* is a glitchathon of a game, but still fun, addicting with its post-nuke open world. **Despite its flaws, I dig it.**"

Hollywood director **John Carpenter** finds something to love in *Fallout 76*. He did make The Ward, we suppose, though that's no reason he should suffer



"We believe that creators are responsible for the game industry's enormous growth and vibrance, and should **earn the lion's share** of industry revenue."

Epic Games boss **Tim Sweeney** puts a dev-friendly gloss on his new storefront's bid to dismantle Steam



"It has been very interesting to me to see a lot of ideas that existed in science-fiction books **slowly become a reality,** and then just become normal."

We can only assume that **Jade Raymond**, who quit EA in October, is talking specifically about 1984

"Putting together a big team… **let's make the best console the people have ever seen.** This is only the start."

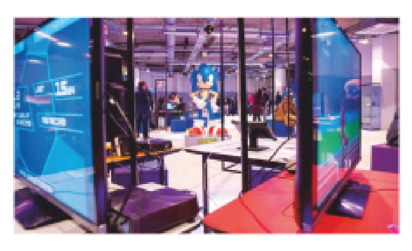


Getty

US rapper **Soulja Boy** is turning his talents to creating videogame hardware. This will definitely end well

ARCADE WATCH

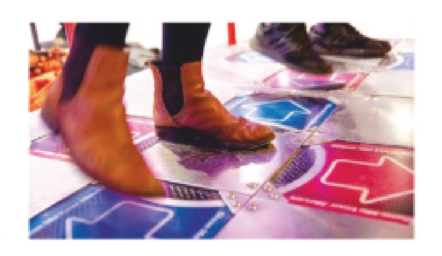
Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Name The National Videogame Museum
Location Sheffield

A slight change of pace this month, with all eyes on the UK for a change. The NVM first opened its doors in Nottingham in 2015, but was forced to close last June after finding it increasingly difficult to operate in the listed building it called home (regulations restrict, and often ban outright, what kinds of alterations occupants can make to the interiors of historic buildings, which isn't much use for a museum).

No matter: the museum has moved 40 miles up the M1 to Sheffield, and a city-centre venue where it hopes to stick around a little longer – and early signs are certainly positive, with the opening weekend a sellout. As in its original home, there's an arcade space filled to bursting with such coin-op classics as *After Burner*, *Space Invaders* and *Pac-Man*. Yet there's plenty going on besides, including a schools initiative that tailors field trips to key-stage curriculums, as well as coding and design workshops. And there's a local element to proceedings, too, with part of the museum given over to a celebration of Sheffield's game-development scene, from Gremlin's pioneering role in the 1980s to present-day flag-flyers Sumo Digital and *Gang Beasts* developer Boneloaf. The team behind the museum will keep close links to Nottingham – they're also behind the annual GameCity festival, which has been running there since 2006. We wish them all the best in their new home.



My Favourite Game
Niamh Houston

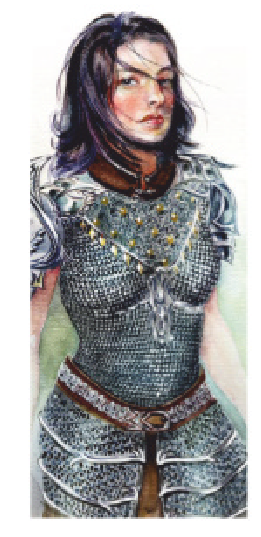
The chiptune artist on Game Boy wizardry, perfectionist tendencies and the game that expanded her world

Niamh Houston is a Northern Irish musician recording under the name Chipzel. After releasing a string of EPs and albums, she began to soundtrack videogames including *Super Hexagon*, *Spectra*, *Interstellaria* and *Crypt Of The NecroDancer*. Here, she talks about the joys of making music with Game Boy, how *Cities: Skylines* brings out her perfectionist streak and the pain of losing a 400-hour save.

What's your earliest gaming memory?
My first memory of games was my older sister playing *Super Mario* on the Super Nintendo, and me never being allowed to play because if I took a turn on a level then I would just mess it up. We had all the classics: *Street Fighter II Turbo*, *Super Mario*, *Kirby*. I remember being obsessed with the music and sound, how different it was. And then when I got some money for my First Communion – that's a big point in your life in the Irish community, where you're able to buy something for yourself for the first time – I got a Game Boy Color. I got *Pokémon Blue*, and I played it to death. I'd play with headphones in. I was just taken away by the sound. I loved how raw it was.

When did you first start thinking about making music with a Game Boy?
It was around the MySpace days, and I was desperately searching for new music. I used to love anything that was a Nintendo remix – you know those hardstyle ones, where they'd just put the *Tetris* theme over the top of it? I was like, I love this, I don't care how cheesy it is. So then I discovered chiptune, this cool underground community of people hacking toys and creating software so that you can make music on a Game Boy. I thought, how do I do this? And it was surprisingly easy. You just need a Game Boy, you go to the Little Sound DJ website, download it, put it on a cartridge – boom. Within about three months I had my first shows, and it just kind of went a bit nuts from there.

LADY LUCK
Houston's currently working with Terry Cavanagh once again, providing music for forthcoming dice-roll-based dungeon crawler *Dicey Dungeons*. "I want it to be super trippy. The inspiration is from '80s and '90s game shows, but I'm also just going to throw in some of my standard high-energy chiptune." Over the past couple of years, however, she's been working on branching out into different kinds of music with more typical hardware: "I think maybe it would be a good idea for me to think about creating another alias, actually – having the Game Boy stuff and then having the more serious, grown-up stuff."



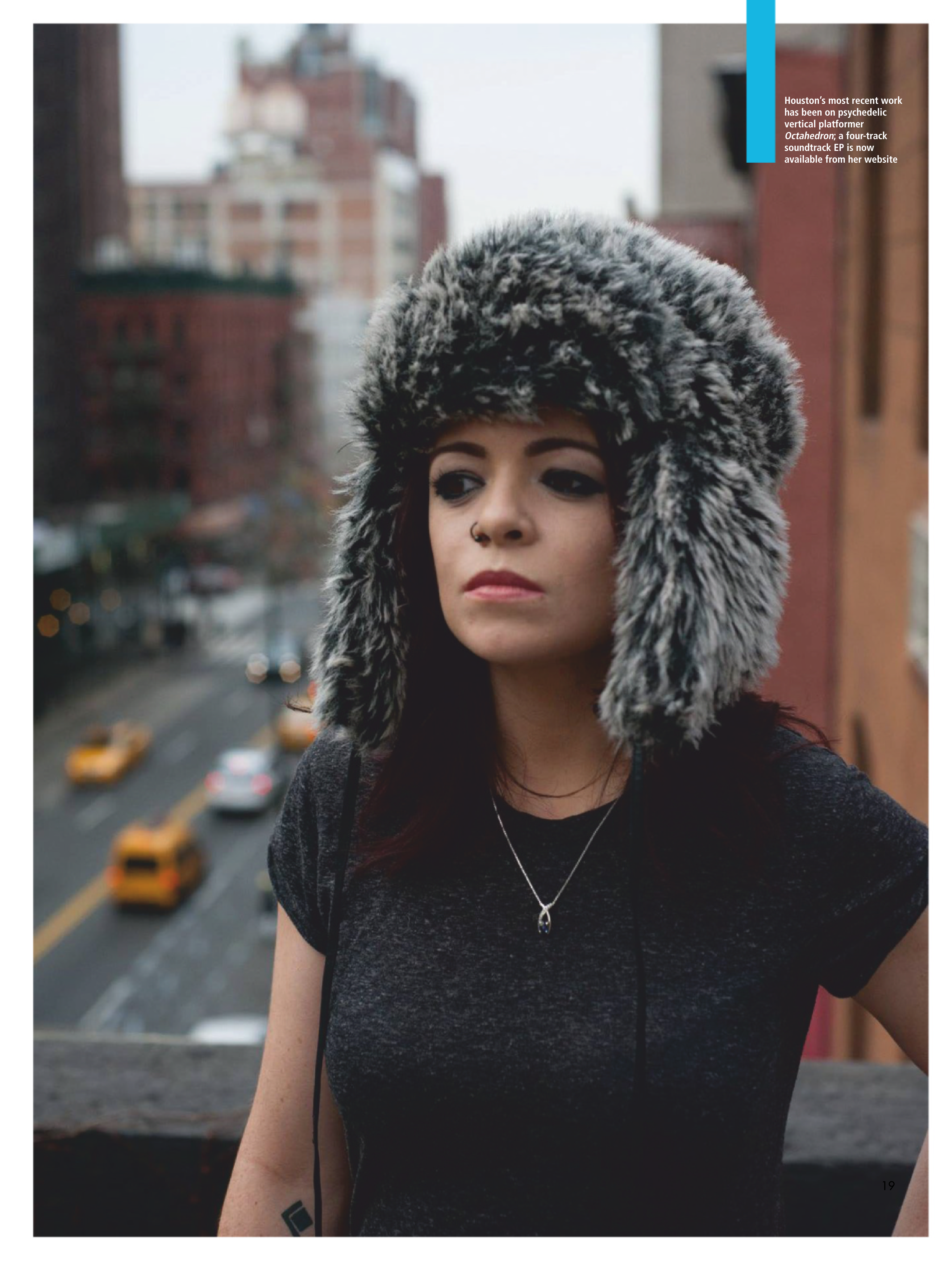
What's it like to work with a piece of videogame hardware?
It's incredibly intimate. You feel the fascination of people that are watching you, because when there's no laptop people are like, 'Where does the music come from? Wait, she's just got a Game Boy?' One of my favourite things when I perform is turning on the Game Boy, hearing the startup sound and seeing the reaction of the crowd. It resonates so much with people. Then you just throw some bangers in their face and they think you're a wizard. I love to instil that fascination that I had when I first saw it. So much of it is about the crowd's energy which gets me more excited, which then gets *them* more excited – it's just a really cool way to make music.

> "When there's no laptop people are like, 'Where does the music come from? Wait, she's got a Game Boy?'"

Do you have time nowadays to play?
There are games I always come back to. When I first started playing games on PC, I was mad about *The Sims* and *Sim City*, so I have a real love for *Cities: Skylines*. I'm a perfectionist at heart, so I'm always like, okay, I'll make this city amazing – no, it's shite, I hate it, I'm going to scrap it and make a new one.

Do you make music in the same perfectionist way you play games?
Weirdly, no! I'll go with all the happy mistakes. It's actually when the best of my creativity comes through – when I do something by accident, and I'm like, 'Oh, that actually sounded really cool'. That's what I love about Game Boy stuff: it allows for a lot of moments like that. There's a really good relationship between how quickly you can get an idea down, and how quickly that idea can give you another bit of inspiration. I find that whenever I'm trying to work on a computer, I'm constantly fighting with the technology, and I'm like, 'How did I get to a point where it makes more sense to make music with this thing?' [laughs]

What's your favourite game of all time?
There is a special place in my heart for *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, because that was my first open-world experience. You know that stereotypical image of a girl in her pyjamas and she hasn't washed her hair in ten years? She's just eating crisps and bread from the bag? That was me with that game. I played 400 hours of it, until I lost my save. I just turned on the Xbox one day and it was gone. And I was like, oh my god! All that work, down the drain! But the music in *Oblivion* was just absolutely beautiful. That was when I was like, okay, I want to make something in my life that's not just Game Boy music. ■



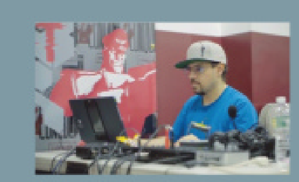
Houston's most recent work has been on psychedelic vertical platformer *Octahedron*; a four-track soundtrack EP is now available from her website



WEBSITE

CLOTHING
Barking Irons x Red Dead Redemption 2
bit.ly/barkingred

Videogame-themed clothing isn't great, as the gigantic pile of XXXL promo T-shirts we use for padding in fragile parcels will attest. While this collaboration between Rockstar and New York-based clothing label Barking Irons exists to promote *Red Dead Redemption 2*, to the naked eye it has nothing to do with videogames: it's simply a well-made (and appropriately priced – the 'gunslinger coat' will run you $250) collection of western workwear. Look closer and there's branding – a subtle R* stitching on a shirt pocket, Arthur Morgan's name printed inside an undershirt's collar, 'The Van Der Linde Gang' on a jacket's inside pocket – but this collection is about having something to wear, rather than to advertise, and it's all the better for it.



VIDEO

Stay Free: The Team Spooky Story
bit.ly/freespooky

The real heroes of the fighting-game community aren't the big-name players; they're the folks working behind the scenes, who helped build a global scene from nothing. People like Victor 'Spooky' Fontañez, who decided one day to start streaming his local fighting-game tournament, and a few short years later was beating IGN to the Evo streaming gig. Filmmaker Esteban Martinez relies heavily on Seth Killian, the FGC's most eloquent (and emotional) voice, to help tell the story of a man who embodies the spirit of a competitive scene that remains grassroots to the core.

WEB GAME

Signed By '89
bit.ly/signedby89

Described by creator Tim Knauf as "mini music management in 64x64 pixel-o-vision", *Signed By '89* is a delightful PICO-8 adventure charting the fortunes of a small-town band looking to make it big. You play as bassist Johnny Gherkin: with the threat of military school hanging over your head, you must write songs, play gigs, earn money and win fans in order to prove yourself to a label scout. In truth, it's not a difficult balancing act – things play out in linear fashion as you keep your band's 'tightness' levels high through regular practice and splash out on instrument upgrades and inspiring LPs to raise Johnny's chances of composing better songs. But *Signed By '89* is rammed to the gills with character and charm, from its flavour text to its bobbing sprites to its catchy chiptune ditties.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

LAPTOP

ROG Strix SCAR II
bit.ly/strixscarii

A decent gaming laptop that isn't the price and size of a small flat is something of a rarity. Asus' ROG Strix SCAR II might have an ostentatious name, but it's remarkably subtle when it comes to design and form factor, the first laptop of its kind to come in at under 400 millimetres wide. The 144Hz super-narrow-bezel display, set in a compact 17-inch chassis, helps reduce input lag, ghosting and motion blur. It's powered by a beefy 8th Generation Intel Core processor with up to 32 gigabytes of memory, and there's even a choice of a GTX 1060 or 1070 graphics card. It actually looks rather slick, too, with customisable RGB lighting that can sync the colour of the light-up logo, lightbar and keyboard.



continue

Mates' rates
Epic games launches its store – offering an 88 per cent revenue share

Free for all
Fortnite's creative mode follows *Minecraft*'s lead. Clever stuff…

Killer instinct
SonicFox's very nervous Game Awards speech is a heartening highlight

Wild card
Persona 5's Joker as DLC? *Smash* continues to surprise

quit

Finder's fee
In comparison, Steam's revenue sharing policy looks Machiavellian

Out of bounds
…but not from the YouTuber who leaked it a couple of days early

Cutting remarks
Tweeters get life bans for threatening to kill Sean Bean – in *Hitman 2*

Inside job
Payday dev Starbreeze is raided by authorities alleging insider trading





www.twitter.com/edgeonline
Follow **Edge** on Twitter


Game Art BA (Hons)
Computer Games Design & Development BSc (Hons)
SHAPE THE FUTURE OF GAME DEVELOPMENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WORCESTER
You will hone your talents to become tomorrow's game artists, designers and programmers, nurtured by industry experienced staff. Through a programme supported by game development professionals as guest lecturers and mentors, you will experience authentic industry practice, developing your passion as you progress your skills in our dedicated Game Studio. Our brand-new facilities are equipped with the latest PC technology and up-to-the-minute industry software such as Autodesk Maya, Marmoset Toolbag and Substance Painter.
To learn more about Game Art and Computer Games Design & Development, and to see module information in detail, please visit worcester.ac.uk
University of Worcester

DISPATCHES FEBRUARY



Issue 327

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins a year's subscription to PlayStation Plus, courtesy of Sony Interactive Entertainment



Song for junior

He many only be 15 months old, but I'm already thinking about how best to educate my son in the world of videogames. He's already shown an interest in electronic entertainment having developed an unnatural ability to locate any electronic device in the room, no matter how well hidden, and I feel that I somehow need to cultivate this.

Our early interests are influenced by our parents' own hobbies until we are old enough to develop our own opinions. This is why, like my dad, I loved Manchester United (despite being from Somerset) and, for a while at least, thought Bon Jovi were the best band in the world. However, my dad was not a gamer so was not able to impart any wisdom in this area. I was left to find my own way.

"Our early interests are influenced by our parents' hobbies until we develop our own"

I asked for a Master System for my sixth birthday and from then on became an ardent Sega fanboy, refusing to touch anything from the old enemy Nintendo. Whilst I had a great time playing games on Sega consoles, I have missed out on some exceptional gaming experiences during my life, that I might not have done with a little guidance. I don't want my son to make the same mistakes that I did so that he can get the most out of hobby that I love.

It seems that most **Edge** readers and staff are now parents and I wondered how everyone else goes about introducing their children to their hobby. Where do I start? Should I dig out my old game collections or buy all the 'classic' mini consoles to give him an appreciation of gaming's past? Should I get him to read through all my back issues of **Edge** so he can develop a more educated opinion? Or should I just let him play whatever he wants and every so often say, 'Why don't you try this?'. Whatever I do he'll probably just spend all his time playing bloody *Fortnite*.

Alex Evans

A quick straw poll yields the following: *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe* with a steering wheel; *Toy Story 3*'s stress-free Toy Box mode; an unplugged SNES, a random cartridge of a game you don't mind losing, and a pot of strawberry jam; something using your new PS Plus subscription; and *Bloodborne*. Though as one wise fellow once told us, be careful what you wish for. Once you get 'em into it, you'll never get 'em out of it.

Sabotage

I recently made the slightly regrettable decision to get up at 1:30am and watch The Game Awards, the "biggest night in gaming" according to host Geoff Keighley.

After dipping in and out of the award show in previous years, I half-expected the same experience here. A three-hour-long advert for new games and well-received ones, with hopefully just the right amount of awkward. Always made for a fun time on Twitter at least.

Pleasantly, I was wrong about the awkwardness. But I wasn't wrong about the marketing.

For the most part, it was a genuinely entertaining event. Unlike the Oscars (which they inevitably want to be compared to), the Game Awards seemed to have a televised audience in mind. There was even a mildly amusing section with a Muppet taking the piss out of the *Fortnite* streamer, Ninja.

Alongside this, seeing the western heads of Nintendo, Xbox and PlayStation (Reggie Fils-Aimé, Phil Spencer and Shawn Layden respectively) all on a stage together set a great tone. This genuinely was a celebration of all games, a ceasefire on the console wars.

However, it was all nearly ruined when, whilst announcing the winner of the Sports and Racing category, a pretty drab advert for a new *Mortal Kombat* game 'hacked' the screen, delaying the award and stealing the thunder from its winner, *Forza Horizon 4*.



Suddenly, all pretence of actual integrity in the awards was gone. Don't forget, everyone, we are here to sell, sell, sell.

I ranted about it on Twitter, but one commenter replied that it was 'only the Sports category though, so no big deal'. In the grand context of the night, they were probably right, but I wonder when games will be appreciated enough for that to be seen as crass? Or has that ship sailed?
Conor Clarke

Events like these always fall apart a bit when they show a little too plainly who's paying for it all. Yet we can't blame Geoff Keighley too much for any of it: it's the price you pay for putting on something of that scale off your own back, with no support from a traditional broadcaster. That said, those anti-vaping adverts were a bit weird.

High plains drifter

That's the way it is... The ceremony of The Game Awards crowned *God Of War* as the GOTY this year. Cory Barlog and his team should be proud of the game they created, an outstanding piece of entertainment driven by a superb narrative and spectacular production values.

That said, we live in a cruel, cruel world where we are forced to pick between Sony Santa Monica's game and a bunch of outlaws from the west. Kratos' tale was a hell of a ride, a memorable experience, yet not comparable to what the mere existence of *Red Dead Redemption 2* means for videogames as a whole.

You probably disagree – I see the fire in your eyes – and I'd like to explain myself, may I? Rockstar's creation goes beyond the limits of my conception of what playing a videogame feels like. Never in my life empathised with a main character and his gang on such a deep level. Never before was I surrounded by a world breathing by itself, letting me find and discover things to do in such a natural and organic way. Never in my life was it so hard for me to think about something outperforming what I was experiencing with a pad in my hands.

Red Dead Redemption 2 should be considered aside any other videogame this year for a simple reason: it smashes the concept of what a videogame is supposed to be, opening a door to the future of this entertainment that will benefit everyone in this industry by demonstrating that the revolution that the virtual worlds we love needed to evolve and expand its boundaries was possible. I just finished this wild ride and I am still pursued by a memory: my life as an outlaw paid off.
Jose Carlos Sevilla

Well, we're glad you're feeling the love –it's been a while since an **Edge** 10 has proven so divisive among readers. At least, if nothing else, you'll all have something to argue about on forums the next time we give out the big one. A side note to the rest of you: Jose's letter is actually peppered with song titles from the *Red Dead Redemption 2* soundtrack, which would have been very clever indeed had he not submitted them all in tell-tale italics.

Rhymin' and stealin'

Is *Ashen* perhaps the long awaited anti-Rockstar game I've been craving? A game where I can be a benevolent übermensch?

I'll be honest, I too have found myself ploughing through pedestrians in *Grand Theft Auto*. Would I, a feminist, have punched a suffragette in the face for the lulz? Maybe (but I wouldn't have put it on YouTube). What's so exhilarating about videogames is that I get to break rules. Give me a society that says I have to act a certain way, and I guarantee you I will do everything I can to deviate. To me, that's player agency in a nutshell.

But despite decades of gaming, I've mostly been rather unsatisfied in my ability to be both a deviant and a hero in games. Acting as a good person in a game is usually just being an errand-boy. On the other hand, doing something authentic usually led to me breaking things. Two of my favourite moments in gaming were in *Journey* and in *Dark Souls*, where players could spend some extra effort to unconditionally help another player. But these moments were limited, nor did they give me the powerful feeling I've felt in Rockstar games.

So what about this *Ashen* game? I've heard there's more focus on helping other players. And you apparently slowly build up a community of folks that are grateful for your exertion. Sounds like my kind of power fantasy. Here's hoping to your crew reviewing the game by the time I clean up my backlog. And if it's not a good game, let me know when *Doshin The Giant* finally gets the sequel it deserves.
Robert August de Meijer

This is precisely the reason that product design by Venn diagram is so effective: kids love potatoes and kids love waffles, so kids will love potato waffles. (And quite right too, they're delicious.) It's that same philosophy that has given us what in a more literal world would have been called *Dark Souls X Journey*. Sure, *Ashen*'s nice enough, but is a dilution of its all-too-obvious influences, rather than an improvement of them. We hope this reply reaches you before you get your wallet out.

Live at PJ's

This coming Friday 14th December, Danny Patton & Pat Nearney bring you an evening of jokes and songs and other things too numerous to mention all for free starting at 7.30 (doors open 7pm).

Free finger buffet, raffle, bring your own booze (fruit juice/mineral water with the buffet). As you are on our mailing list you do not need to have a ticket.

Whatever you did on December 14 is now old-fashioned, out of date, unsophisticated, unsociable, uninteresting, unprepossessing, and unseasonable, so come to the Hall.
Slim Wilkinson

Slim! Lovely to hear from you as always, but if we've told you once about our lead times, we've told you... okay, three times. Still, thanks for the reminder. We've added 'sort out that spam filter' to our list of new year's resolutions. ■



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

The mainstream conversation about sex'n'violence in videogames is one of, generally, two positions. One side says that to participate in virtual depictions of evil acts will normalise those acts in the player's mind, and risk encouraging the player to behave likewise in real life. The other side cleaves to the "catharsis hypothesis", which holds that such games provide a safe outlet for the enaction of our brutish desires. But what if there is a third possibility? What if we don't have those desires already, but games are programming us to have them?

This is one fascinating suggestion in a book entitled The Playstation Dreamworld, by Alfie Bown. It promises to show how academic psychoanalysis can inform videogame criticism, which I confess I did not immediately think a promising avenue. But his argument about desire is intriguing. From a psychoanalytic point of view, Bown observes, there is no such thing as a deep-seated desire that all humans across the ages have shared. That there can be transhistorical desires is itself an "ideology", producing a false consciousness through which we fail to appreciate how our desires are formed by our social environment. If this is right, the disturbing corollary is that we don't have an atavistic desire to kill people which a shooter videogame just lets us express harmlessly. It is, on the contrary, the videogame that is implanting such desires in us.

"Desire itself has an imitative quality," Bown writes, "so that there is no original desire and certainly no transhistorical impulses." Instead, we desire because we see someone else desiring, and — to risk a comical repetition — we desire to desire in the same way. So videogames cannot be satisfying deep, "original" desires, because such desires don't exist. "The longstanding idea that videogames appeal to these basic transhistorical configurations of desire produces an imagined 'other' who desires as such and invites the gamer to desire on these terms... So, rather than appealing to universal desires, videogames can program the user to desire in a universal way."



Illustration kaeru.com.ar

In their capability to implant new desires in us, games have more cultural power than they are often given credit for

The jargony prose notwithstanding, what first seems like a too-neat inversion of accepted wisdom might come to seem plausible. Consider, for example, the fact reported a few years ago that one of the most popular dream jobs named by high-school boys in America was that of sniper. Clearly there is no deep-wired evolutionary desire to be a sniper. Instead, the desire to be a sniper must have been conditioned into these young men by the rise in sniper fictions, and particularly videogames. Similarly, I never wanted to swing on web ropes through New York City until I saw *Spider-Man*. Or, to put the point more basically, I never wanted to play *Defender* until I played *Defender*, after which I really wanted to play *Defender* again.

At Apple, Steve Jobs thought consumer research was pointless because he saw his job as giving people what they didn't know they wanted. Similarly, videogames give us desires that we didn't know we wanted, and once we have them we want to "compulsively re-enact" those scenarios, Bown says. All the more potentially disturbing, then, if the scenarios are murderous. But the flipside of the argument is that, in their capability to implant new desires in us, videogames have more potential cultural power than they are often given credit for, and they could be a properly liberating and subversive force.

Such things have always been possible, of course, and Bown is seemingly unaware of the extraordinary art-games produced in the 1980s by Automata, for instance, but in the contemporary field he does offer interesting readings. *Papers, Please*, he argues, "confronts the player with the realisation that most of the gamer's own enjoyment has come not from the minor subversion of the authoritation government's regulations... but from the regular and everyday imposition of the law onto the other". It is the inverse of *Watch Dogs*. "*Papers, Please* is a subversive game inviting the gamer to experience and reflect on conformist enjoyment, whereas *Watch Dogs* is a conformist game inviting the gamer to experience subversive enjoyment without reflection." Nice.

So far, Bown notes accurately, the majority of games are still conformist in nature. But with their power to re-engineer our desires, they could yet take us to strange and beautiful new places. It's a hope that has existed, more or less, as long as videogames themselves. But that is no reason to abandon the desire — wherever it may come from.

Steven Poole's Trigger Happy 2.0 is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net



NATHAN BROWN

Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

Some months back I wrote about the problem with videogame intros: that, as games get bigger and developers and publishers obsess over how to keep us engaged in hour 100, they are overlooking the importance of hour one. Ever since I wrote that, something's been niggling at me. There's a problem with that argument: developers aren't exactly nailing their endgames, either.

This was really rammed home to me this month by *Destiny 2*'s new non-expansion, Black Armory, which turned out to be even more annoying than its spelling. Bungie's trying something new here, doing away with the sort of mini-expansions it has put out over the course of previous years in between the big September content drops. Previously you'd get a few new story missions, strikes and adventures, and some kind of new endgame activity. Now, as part of its attempt to 'put the hobby back' into *Destiny*, Bungie is releasing smaller, cheaper updates that raise the level cap and extend the endgame.

Makes sense, doesn't it? After all, the only people still playing *Destiny* at this time of year are people who are happy going through the same weekly rituals to make a number go up. You can't dispute the logic of making the target number higher, and adding tough new ways to reach it, and sodding off all the other stuff. Why spend time and money creating campaign missions that take months to make and 20 minutes to complete, never to be touched again, while your most committed players complain there's nothing else to do but raid three times a week?

Unfortunately, Bungie seems to have assumed that you can simply do away with that kind of thing and not put anything in its place. And so I log on to *Destiny*, keen to find out what new stuff awaits, and find that there is none, because I'm not of a high enough level to access it yet. I watch a cutscene and am shown a new part of the main social hub, then am sent out to grind away at existing mission types on existing locations before I'm powered up enough for the new stuff. The same stuff I was doing in the game a couple of months ago.



Illustration **kaeru.com.ar**

> I love it when I have a game I can play every day, and that rewards me for doing so, but doesn't punish me if I don't

This has been a long journey for Bungie; the *Destiny* experiment is four years old now, and the studio continues to tinker away in the lab, in search of some magic formula that can attract new players while continuing to enthral existing ones. It's an elusive goal, and one I'm not sure will ever be reached. The root cause of many of *Destiny*'s problems over the years is *World Of Warcraft*, a game that reached a dizzying peak from which down was the only way. Players burn out and leave; when a new expansion arrives, only a proportion of them come back, sprint through the new content and burn out again, the loop continuing until no one is left. *Destiny 1* did well after a lousy start, but the idea is to grow the game from that baseline, not watch it slowly shrink.

And so *Destiny* has oscillated over the years between being too hardcore, too casual, too stingy and too generous, as Bungie continues its quest to solve the ultimate problem of the game as a service; the endgame of the endgame, if you will. It has got away with its mis-steps because *Destiny*'s beating heart is not the Skinner box of its loot system, as its many detractors claim. Rather it is in a rock-solid action game whose appeal keeps its players playing through the worst of content droughts. Even as I was grumpily learning how little Black Armory had to offer me at launch the other night, I was enjoying myself. You could have the most perfectly structured endgame in the world, but if the game around it doesn't feel good in the hands, there's no point.

I'm fascinated by endgames. I love farming, and even grinding sometimes; I love it when I have a game I can play every day, and that rewards me for doing so, but doesn't punish me if I don't. This is probably just as well, since at this rate approximately 98 per cent of all new game releases will be built like this in five years' time. There's a broader conversation to be had about being respectful of the player's time – much has been made of big-name games selling poorly, and I think the heart of that is that every one of them is 100 hours long and has to be played every day if you don't want to fall off the pace – but when it works, there's nothing like it. When we fall in love with a game, we want to play it forever. So long as the Bungies, Blizzards and BioWares of this world keep up the search for that perfect formula, I'm happy to keep on playing their games.

Nathan Brown is ***Edge****'s editor. This column was magically assembled over several weeks from RNG paragraph drops*



ALEX HUTCHINSON

Hold To Reset

Building a new game, a new studio and a new life from the ground up

Barring some unforeseen disaster or catastrophic hard-drive failure, our game, *Journey To The Savage Planet*, was announced on December 6 at The Game Awards in Los Angeles. We really hope it piqued your interest. It feels like we just started but already we're coming up on the second anniversary of the studio, so it feels amazing to finally be able to talk more openly about the game.

Based on the name, you can probably guess that there's a pulpy sci-fi quality to the game, and while it's definitely not retro, we wanted to recapture the days when the genre was filled with optimistic and hopeful stories, the days when people imagined journeying to the stars in search of adventure and glory, when everyone was certain that intelligent life was a common feature of the universe and that the future of humanity was a massive opportunity we should all work together to grasp.

In game terms, it's a feeling I remember from playing games as a kid. Hopeful; upbeat; positive; *fun*. We want those cerulean blue skies that made so many Sega games pop; we want the weird and wacky creatures from the D&D Monstrous Manual that you couldn't quite wrap your head around; we want the feeling of exploring the unknown, with little equipment but high hopes. We're tired of reality. We're tired of grey and brown and escaping the apocalypse. Let's all go on an adventure-vacation off-planet instead.

And hopefully it's funny. Not in a 'watch the humorous cinematics' kind of way, but in that uniquely videogame version of slapstick where you can't help but laugh as your co-op partner runs past you while being pursued by a bear on fire. It's a systemic form of humour that is unique to our medium and criminally underutilised. We have tried to layer in as many optional systems and opportunities for the player as possible, so as you stumble around our world, following either one of our objectives or one of your own, you should trip over content that's surprising and funny as well as occasionally challenging.



Illustration kaeru.com.ar

We're tired of grey and brown and escaping the apocalypse. Let's all go on an adventure vacation off-planet

In *Savage Planet* you work for a company called Kindred Aerospace, a group of space pioneers who are charmingly proud of being the fourth-best space exploration company in operation, and who have sent you to a random planet to see if there's any chance that it could be used as a future home for humanity. It's your job to explore it, catalogue its flora and fauna, survive and see what secrets it holds, even though at the start of the game you have quite literally nothing but a can of beans as a tool. (At least they're space beans.)

We're also jettisoning a lot of the heavy storytelling we've sometimes embraced in the past in favour of a more player-driven experience. Objectives come and go as you identify needs in the environment, and even though there are many designed encounters, we're trying to keep the choice of where, when and how as much in your hands as possible.

To be clear, it's not an MMORPG and it's not a survival crafting game. It's a firstperson adventure for normal people in extraordinary situations. If I could have made your character slightly overweight without it feeling ridiculous then I would have. You play yourself, sent into space in the face of epic odds but with a thirst for challenge and a lust for being the first person to set foot on a new world. And as an explorer, you are not just a soldier: you are as much a botanist, a cartographer and a hiker as you are a person with guns.

Which is good, because the world you find yourself in looks bit like the cover to an old Yes album. It's bright and colourful and not much like Earth at all. We wanted to send you to a place our former employers would never have let us build: weird, completely unmoored from reality and happily disobeying most laws of physics and nature. And you'll get to do it with none of the business trappings that have started to pollute the triple-A space either. No loot boxes, no pay to win, no pointless grinding, no microtransactions and no algorithmic porridge content trying to drag out a short experience forever.

We're trying to make the kind of game you could play with your best friend on the couch on a Saturday morning, talking and strategising and laughing, rather than watching cinematics. It's the kind of game that you can finish, and the kind of game that I hope says a lot about the kind of studio Typhoon will become.

That said, I showed my five-year-old son Kasper the opening scenes, and he said, 'What is this? It's about nothing.' So maybe hold off on the preorder until my next column.

Alex Hutchinson is co-founder of Montreal-based Typhoon Studios. He can be found on Twitter at @BangBangClick

#328

H Y P E

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Hype content

Previous business

There was a time, believe it or not, when a game's release date was considered the beginning of the end of its story. Its marketing campaign and time in the preview-stage spotlight were over; it was now in the review section, and would be discussed on bulletin boards (under-30s, ask your dad) for a spell before being forgotten about in favour of the next big thing. As we take our first tentative steps into 2019, it's worth reflecting on how different things are now – for better, and for worse.

Of all the games listed on the opposite page, only one can be expected to follow the well-worn path of the 'traditional' game. Sega's *Judge Eyes*, now known as *Judgment*, will arrive on western shores some six months after its launch in Japan, just like the bad old days.

For everything else, launch is likely just the start. It's no coincidence that so many games these days are revealed with 'TBA' next to the release date: it simply doesn't matter that much, a mere foreword to the real meat of the thing. *Hades*, another Hype Roundup star, was a surprise announcement during this issue's production, and was launched immediately into Early Access. *Ring Of Elysium*, Tencent's winter-sports riff on Battle Royale, launched a few months ago in other territories. Now it is in Europe, Tencent's years-long battle plan will kick in.

Even games that appear to be unsuited to the live-service model will have a life long beyond launch. The porting scene has never been busier, nor more lucrative. *Sayonara Wild Hearts*, the new game from *Device 6* and *Year Walk* developer Simogo, is simply too good to remain a Switch exclusive for long. Amanita Design knows *Creaks* will be as good on a touchscreen as it is played with a mouse. On it goes. If, after all that, you're wondering what purpose a magazine preview section has in the year 2019, you're not alone. We'd be keen to hear your thoughts.

MOST WANTED

Crackdown 3 Xbox One
Can it possibly live up to that astounding debut showing at Gamescom 320 years ago? Can its unique brand of open-world exploration still enthral after so many years away? We'll find out soon enough. If nothing else, it'll be nice to have an excuse to turn on the Xbox for once.

In The Valley Of Gods PC
Firewatch ensured that, if Campo Santo makes it, we're going to play it. Yet the studio's acquisition by Valve does raise a few concerns. While we're assured it's business as usual for the developer, we can't shake the lingering concern that Valve has got the team making *Dota* hats.

Wargroove PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One
To play *Into The Breach* on Switch is to be reminded that this is a cruel world in which *Advance Wars* somehow no longer exists. All hopes rest, then, on this, erm, 'homage' to Intelligent Systems' peerless tactics game, due in the next few months from *Stardew* publisher Chucklefish.



Next year marks *Minecraft*'s tenth anniversary. After a decade of continual development, not only at Mojang but also in the community of server operators, mod developers and world builders that's grown up around it, now the kids who got into *Minecraft* in its early days are in their late teens and 20s. The *Minecraft* generation has come of age, and in *Hytale*, we're seeing it starting to make its own games. *Hytale* is fundamentally a heightened version of *Minecraft*. It boasts prettier graphics, more user-friendly features, more dynamic systems and more dramatic action. Players will explore a huge procedurally generated continent of different biomes, find pre-designed dungeons to raid, fight monsters, craft items and cultivate farms.

You might feel a little underwhelmed at the prospect of another *Minecraft*-like. Countless similar ones have appeared over the past decade, including *Portal Knights*, *Dragon Quest Builders*, *Boundless* and *SkySaga*. However, few have leaned into every aspect of what *Minecraft* is. *Minecraft* isn't just a procedural world. Or a survival game, an exploration game, a social hangout, an MMORPG, a building tool, an array of multiplayer minigames, a PvP arena, an engineering game, or a platform for modding. It's all of this, and around it has grown a vast ecosystem of smaller communities, each tapping into a different facet.

As a game being made by a studio which has helped chisel many of those facets, it's best to understand *Hytale* as an attempt to live up to and exceed all of what *Minecraft* is today. Since 2013, Hypixel has run one of *Minecraft*'s biggest servers, creating free-to-play multiplayer minigames such as BedWars, SkyWars and Mega Walls, which have amassed the company 14.1 million accounts. In 2016 it recorded 64,533 concurrent players, which would comfortably put the network within the top ten most played games on Steam. It's been fully independent throughout, its popularity allowing it to grow a team of full-time developers, hiring most from *Minecraft*'s community, to some 40 members.

But until now, Hypixel has existed in a bubble. Its achievements are more or less invisible to the wider industry and it's entirely reliant on *Minecraft*, a fact that's concerned founder **Simon Collins-Laflamme** and COO **Aaron Donaghey** since 2014, when Mojang began to enforce its EULA. Until that point, the official line was that no thirdparty was allowed to make money from *Minecraft*, but Mojang had never acted on it and an entire server industry grew up in its shadow, much of which was based on selling items that gave play advantages. The new EULA finally legally allowed servers to make money, but never ▶



Hytale's dramatic world generation is product in part of a studio which was founded by a *Minecraft* builder who made his name creating remarkable large-scale environments





from selling advantages, and it turned the industry upside down. Hypixel had to scramble to change all its games so they only sold cosmetic items, and for several months its income was seriously dented. "It was a big, giant reminder that you don't own what you're doing here. It's just a mod," says Donaghey.

It was time to think about making their own thing. "That choice came out of a feeling of self-preservation," says **Sean McCafferty**, a designer who'd worked in the mainstream industry before joining the team to help professionalise the ways it designed levels. "We don't own *Minecraft*. We have no clout in the decisions that are made around the game. It's been really good to us, and we get on well with both Microsoft and Mojang, but we were painfully aware that we weren't the masters of our own destinies."

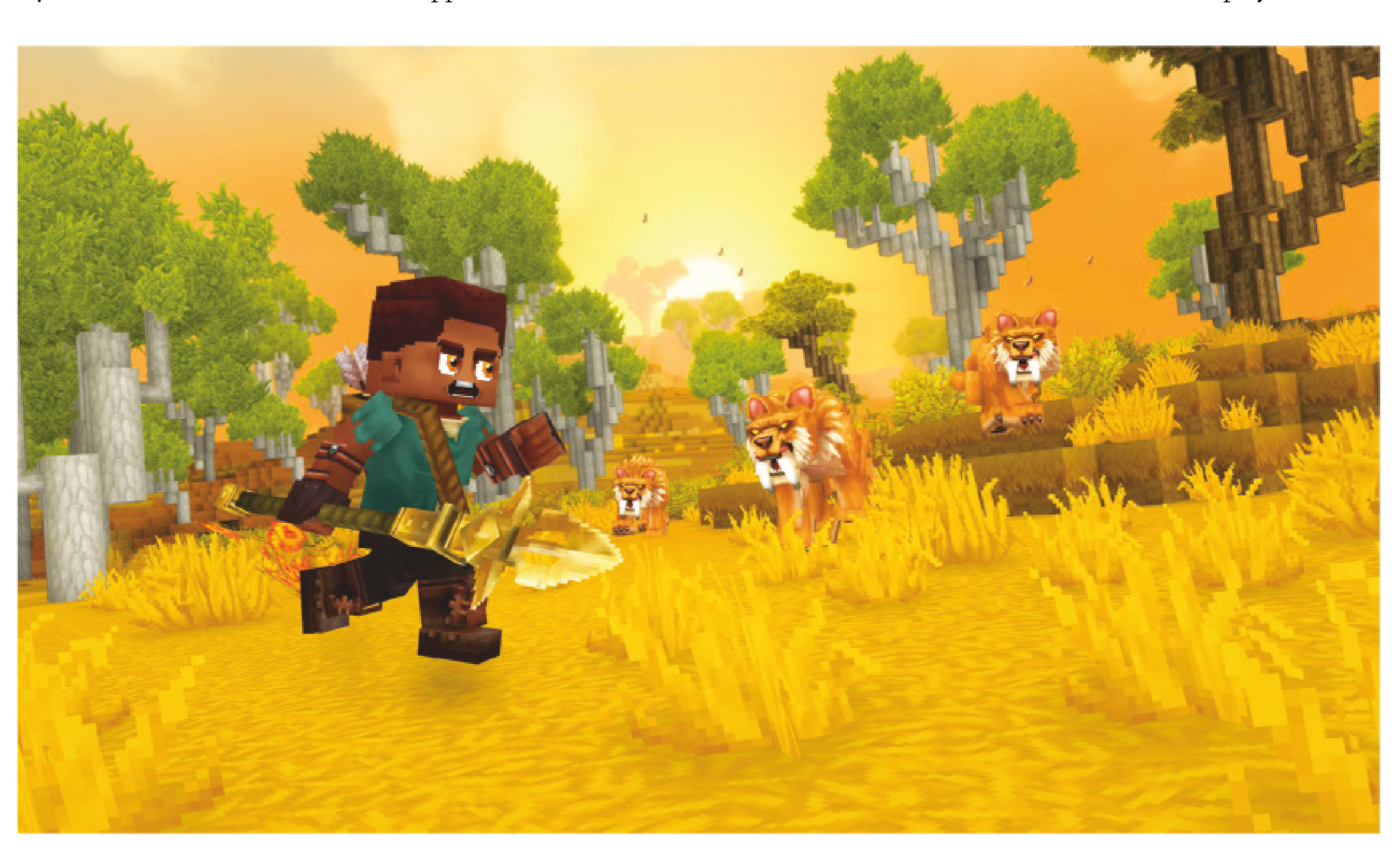
At the time, Collins-Laflamme was thinking about how he could relieve some of the pressure of running so many minigames and create opportunities to make more. "The EULA had a good side, which was that we became a legitimate business. I felt comfortable to hire people, because before we knew we could be breaking rules." So the team grew from seven people to 30 in six months. Work began on *Hytale* the following year, even as Hypixel's *Minecraft* operations continued to grow.

It wasn't inevitable that *Hytale* would be a block game. The team explored many other concepts, but it returned to what it knew, partly because it's what Hypixel's community wants. "We had to do right by them," Donaghey says. "It made sense for us. We knew that space, we'd spent tens of thousands of hours creating games and expertise. We saw a lot of games coming to the block genre and a lot of the time their teams had backgrounds in the traditional industry, and I think they only looked at what *Minecraft* is on the surface."

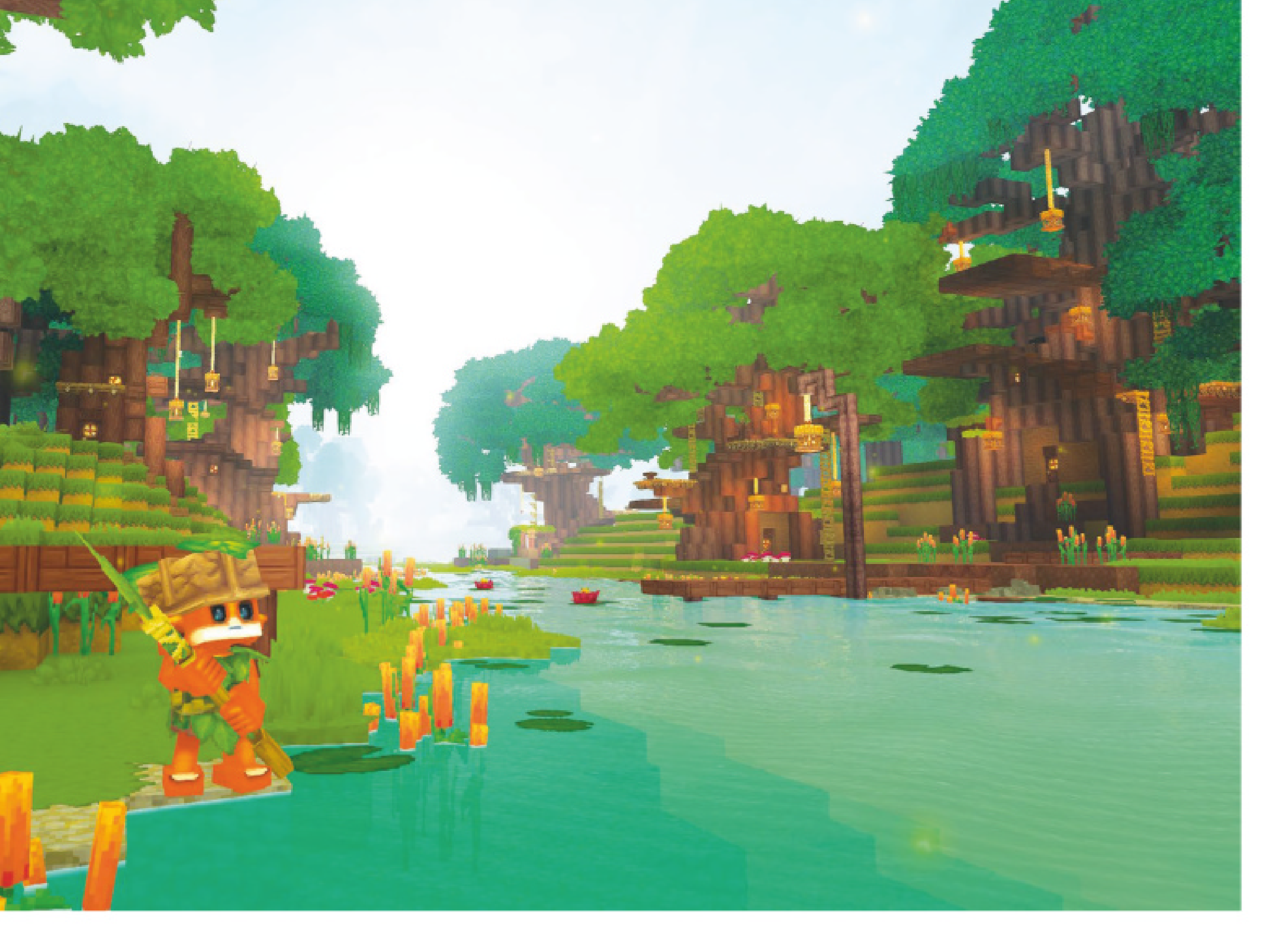
To take one facet of *Minecraft*'s creative community, machinima, *Hytale* will ship with built-in camera controls so players can



The exact way *Hytale*'s online multiplayer will work – whether it will run on shared servers or by players connecting to each other's worlds – isn't yet decided



***Hytale*'s detailed art is all completely editable by any player, right down to expressions and animation**



LEFT **Rather than a *Minecraft*-style infinite world, *Hytale* is set on a continent split into five zones. Each comprises a set of procedurally generated biomes, and has a portal to a predesigned dungeon, which acts as a lynchpin to the game's story**

immediately get into making films. Recognising the vital role that YouTube has played in *Minecraft* – and Hypixel's – history, players will be able to watch videos together from within the game. For builders, who create vast voxel tableaux using mod tools, *Hytale* will ship with a large-scale block editor. For those who want to tweak every aspect of *Hytale*'s appearance, there will be a browser-

"We were painfully aware that we weren't the masters of our own destinies"

based collaborative 3D modelling and animation tool which will update the game in realtime. For those who want to tweak the way the game works, every property of every block is editable and a scripting system can execute code. "Blocks should be malleable," Donaghey says. All of this will be shareable with other players, and it will ship with updated versions of Hypixel's existing minigames, including BedWars, Build Battle and Mega Walls.

Hypixel's deep involvement with its community has led to a new relationship. Riot Games, along with big-name angels including *World Of Warcraft* lead designer Rob Pardo and *Quake* pro Dennis 'Thresh' Fong, has led a fresh round of investment in Hypixel. Donaghey says that Riot has a deep affinity with Hypixel's community-first approach. "I think they feel a spiritual connection to us. You think of the story of *Dota*, which existed on *WarCraft III*, owned by Blizzard, and *Dota* became *League Of Legends*. You can draw the exact same parallel with Hypixel being on *Minecraft*, and now we're making *Hytale*."

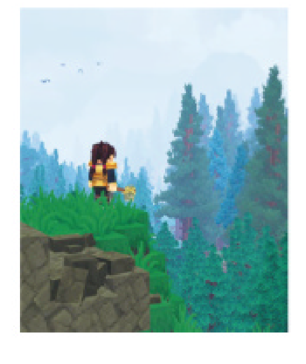
Donaghey's very aware that, although Hypixel's work so far has been "just a mod", *PUBG* and *Counter-Strike* got started in the same way. *Hytale* could prove the block genre still has potential. Not that Hypixel was looking for investment. "Riot asked if we needed help, but we were standoffish," he says. "We wanted to be independent." Hypixel has carved a deal that retains its independence while taking the real benefit of working with Riot: advice on management, production, and being a grown-up company.

Still, *Minecraft* casts a long shadow over Hypixel's future, not least because its server will continue as long as there's a community for it. But can *Hytale* take *Minecraft* players' interest? Certainly, Microsoft's recent pronouncement that it has no plans for a sequel came as a relief. "It's a good thing for us," says Collins-Laflamme. "If they announced *Minecraft 2*, it could be a worry." That leaves space for Hypixel to build into and improve upon, from *Minecraft*'s still-clunky combat to the still-arcane technicalities of modding.

At the same time, building so many interlocking tools and systems is demanding indeed. "Bringing it all together is a lot more complicated than making simple systems," Collins-Laflamme says. "We've gained a lot of respect for Mojang. We've learned how hard it is to make a block game with so many features and complexities." That's the mark of coming of age: realising the achievements of your forebears, and building on them. ■



***Hytale*'s combat aspires to be more dynamic than other block games', a response to the fact that despite being so simplistic, combat is an important part of *Minecraft*'s multiplayer scene**



Pushing blocks

Much of Hypixel's success as a *Minecraft* server was based on its knack for pushing *Minecraft* into doing things it was never meant to, offering a network-wide party system, anti-cheat tools and new models and sounds. "Eventually we started to hit the technical ceiling of what *Minecraft* could do," programmer **Nick Krecklow** says. One game, *Turbo Kart Racers* (which used the bat as the basis for the kart) was a remarkable achievement, but it suffered because it was stuck with *Minecraft*'s base camera and controls, so looking and driving directions were separate and the view couldn't be set back far enough behind the kart. "Our mechanics couldn't keep speed because we were still in *Minecraft*." With its own game, Hypixel can break free.



CREAKS

Prepare to face the furniture in Amanita's spine-tingling puzzle-platformer

Developer/publisher Amanita Design
Format PC
Origin Czech Republic
Release 2019

Radim **Jurda**'s greatest fear is being misinterpreted. His response to our question is perhaps not so unexpected: this is the artist and designer's first ever interview, after all, and he's keen to get his point across clearly. Indeed, *Creaks* is an oddity that requires explanation, a puzzle-platformer in which things are frequently not as they may appear. It's a horror game – although it's more unsettling than scary – in which you must tiptoe through a ramshackle house in search of an exit. Its inhabitants are frequent obstacles to this. They mess with your head, too. Did that hatstand just move, or did we imagine it?

Creaks was born from the shadows in the edges of the eyes, the anxiety at not knowing what is real and what's simply a trick of the light. It first took shape as a concept around five years ago, as Jurda's diploma project at his university. "It was all about this aspect of what you see, but also how generally there is some part of the story that you don't know, and how you fill it with your own imagination," Jurda says. "And how actually that will become reality for you, and can become completely different to the real thing." A tricky email exchange, in which Jurda's own assumptions led to the appearance of a problem that didn't really exist, had inspired this train of thought. "I had misinterpreted some stuff, and behaved completely differently. So this was a theme that was interesting to me at the time. I was doing these visualisations of feelings versus reality, and how something simple can be difficult for somebody and their psychology. Some simple stuff, it can be a maze."

Maze is right. *Creaks'* setting is a warren of hand-drawn hallways and rickety ladders: our terrified avatar finds himself lost inside it after peeling back a section of wallpaper in his home and crawling through a hidden tunnel. Whether this world beyond the wallpaper is real or simply an invention of his own mind is unclear. But the atmosphere is as real and as thick as smoke, our hero jogging along nervously. You'd hope a game called *Creaks* would deliver on the audio front, and it does: floorboards groan and portcullises roar in an almost human manner. And then there are the things hung on the walls and tucked away on shelves. We could swear those shears are champing their bladed jaws at us threateningly, the teapots laughing at us with flapping lids – but every time we look closer, they seem to stop. It's deliciously awful, a susurration of sound that makes our skin prickle.

It's almost a relief when a solid, more recognisable threat appears. Mechanical, one-eyed guard dogs patrol the halls: if we get too close, they charge angrily, following barks with deadly bites. This is the first Amanita game ▶



Creaks' protagonist used to be far less cartoony, we're told. We're shown early sketches – his current wide-eyed stare and fluffy hair suits and conveys his vulnerable status far better



With its wonky perspectives and swirling lines of paint, certain scenes in *Creaks* are eerily reminiscent of Edvard Munch's work. Jan Chlup's art sets an unsettling tone

in which the player can die – although in an artistic twist, it's portrayed almost like shadow puppetry. "I had it in my original concepts, and the diploma demo and concept videos," Jurda says, "So Jakub [Dvorský, Amanita Design founder] saw it from the beginning." It may have been a new, slightly darker and even more traditional move for the Czech studio, but it was no impediment to its signing of the game: indeed, Dvorský and Jurda agreed that a death state would introduce a degree of tension in a horror puzzle game. "We were just discussing how we would actually picture it," Jurda says. "We agreed that there wouldn't be blood everywhere. We had a hand-drawn version, but in the end we didn't use it. It had to be not too much, not too brutal. It wouldn't fit the game: it's like a fairytale adventure. So the deaths have almost a kind of humorous feel."

The clumsy dogs are starting to grow on us, too, especially as we become more familiar

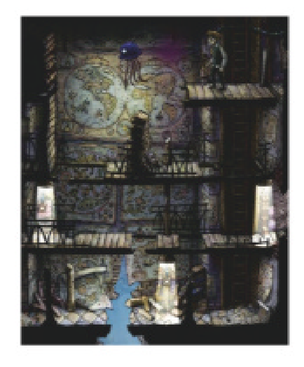
In Creaks, dreamlike design is balanced with clearly defined mechanical rules

with *Creaks'* workings. Screen by screen, we learn to navigate strangely constructed rooms, their floors linked by ladders: switching on lights keeps the dogs at bay, and so progression is about working out how to lure, trap and circumvent enemies using wit and good timing. In fact, in the early stages, it becomes a little rote. And then we hit a switch, and a flood of light catches a dog mid-charge. It transforms into a small chest of drawers, the sudden change in momentum causing it to rattle ever so slightly before settling. Harmless. Caught entirely unawares, we laugh – and flick the switch a few more times, just to check we've really seen what we've just seen.

Creaks, in fact, was almost called *Pareidolia*, after the phenomenon that causes human brains to see faces in inanimate objects. "It was built on this – it was the main idea," Jurda says. "During my diploma, I would go walking in the forest. Somehow you see the shapes of the trees, and your imagination starts to work. I liked this concept that you see something, but you don't see it completely. And then your imagination works and completes it somehow according to you." We come to see, and perhaps not see, much more. Gently humming jellyfish creatures idly patrol a set route, reorienting themselves when they bump into walls (which we can use to our advantage) and becoming end tables when illuminated. In other sections, a shadowy twin parallels our every movement, a la *Super Mario*'s double cherry: the trick is to manoeuvre our doppelgänger underneath a lightbulb and transform it into a hatstand.

When several enemy types come together in areas with multiple ladders, drawbridges, ledges – even, later, a portable lightswitch that we carry and can operate from anywhere – puzzles ramp up in complexity. Indeed, this is perhaps Amanita's most logic-orientated puzzle game, and it's something to sink the teeth into. And the musical progress indicators are an inspired move, outstripping the studio's traditional hint systems. There's always an element of experimentation at the beginning of a puzzle sequence, as we test out what does what. But as we slowly piece together an order to our actions, the score builds, the melody filling out encouragingly to let us know we're thinking along the right lines. "We have two to three progresses in the puzzle solution, in the music," Jurda says, delighted that it's a noticeable detail.

But every detail in *Creaks* sings, even though they're often cleverly positioned in the periphery. From the moving objects on the walls to the shifting nature of the score, itself a kind of whispering communication, *Creaks* makes its intent clear as a puzzle-platformer of real pedigree and considerable craft. Amanita's hand is visible here, yes, but only as a means of focusing, intensifying and delivering on an idea. This could have easily been an indistinct prospect, being built around such an ephemeral concept: instead, dreamlike design is balanced with clearly defined mechanical rules with an endearing sense of humour – and there's room for more additions to be layered on throughout its world's five areas. If Jurda's greatest fear really is being misinterpreted, he can rest easy in this case: there can be no mistaking *Creaks'* singular identity and intentions. Now, if you'll excuse us, we've got a hatstand to burn. ■



Noise solution

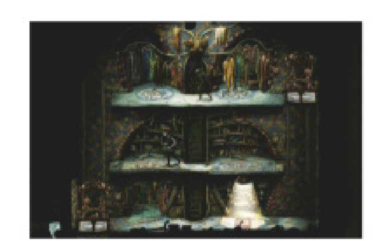
Audio is a crucial component of most horror games, but *Creaks*' evocative title promises a lot. "It was the biggest challenge to find the voice for the dog," Jurda says. "We took a lot of tries finding something that would be between barking and some object doing the sound. I think, in the end, Matouš [Godik, sound designer] did it on cello somehow." Scottish composer Joe Acheson, aka Hidden Orchestra, provides the score, and each of the game's five sections has its own appropriate musical theme. "In the beginning in the attic, we use percussion and try to keep it kind of simple, almost prehistoric. Then there is the Librarian's world, which is kind of spiritual […] We're getting more and more modern as we descend through this house."

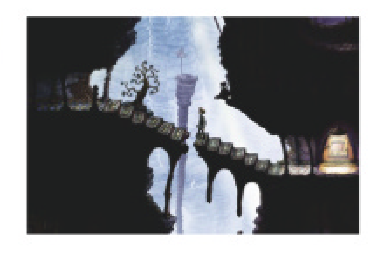












TOP **Collapsing floors and one-sided doors often force us to recalculate our path through a level.**
ABOVE **Ladders are a risky move – you're vulnerable to attack if you don't time the climb correctly. Lifts are a slightly safer option**



TOP **Your original motivation may be to escape the nightmare you've wandered into, but a giant marauding cat-beast threatening the local bird population soon requires your intervention.**
RIGHT **Paranoia runs rampant in *Creaks*' house. Perversely, this horrifying-looking kite won't menace you. The unassuming little cabinet below, however, is another matter entirely – just don't turn out the lights**

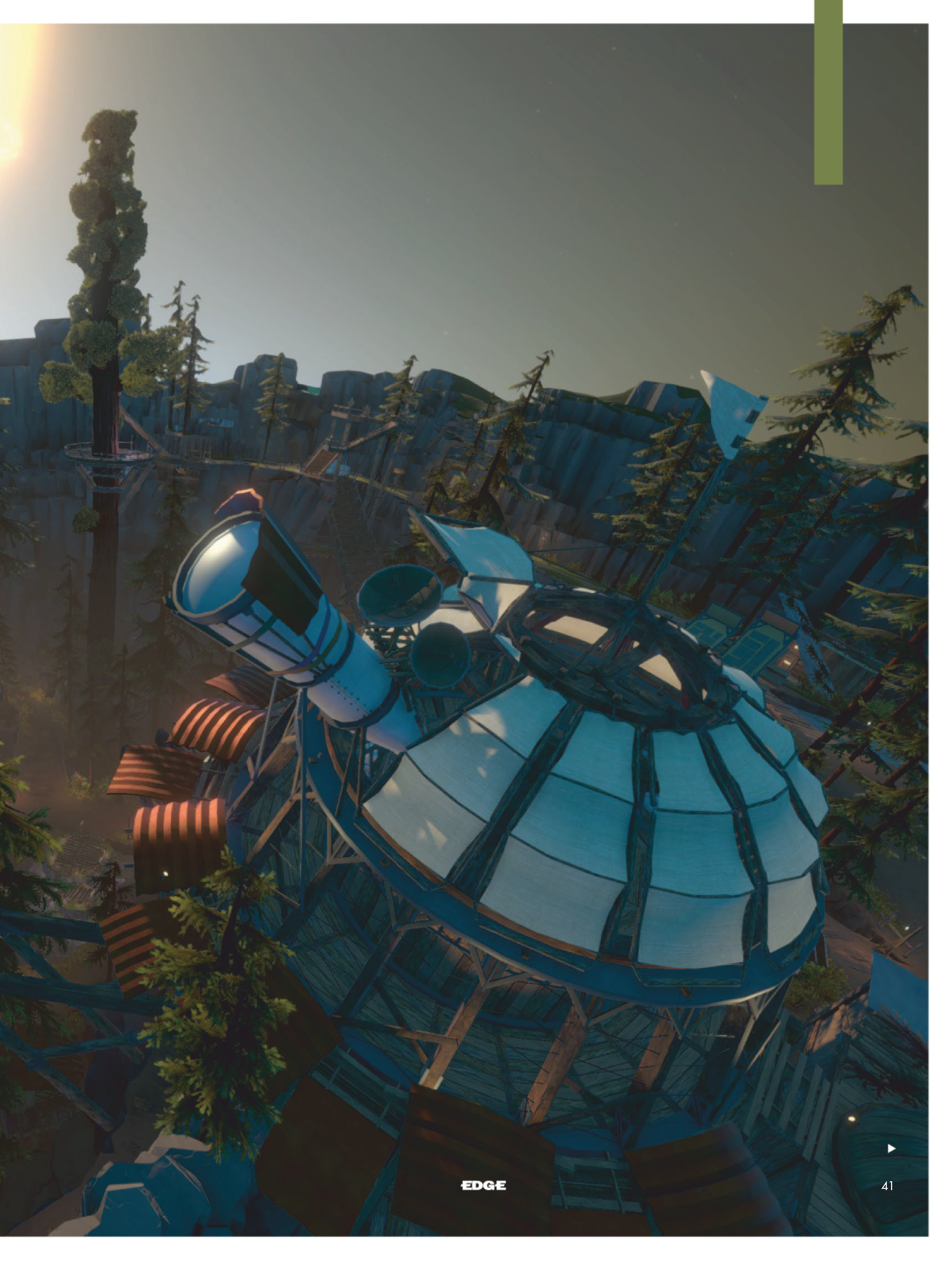
OUTER WILDS

Could Mobius Digital's IGF winner really be an interstellar Wind Waker?

Developer	Mobius Digital
Publisher	Annapurna Interactive
Format	PC
Origin	US
Release	2019



***Outer Wilds*' home planet has been designed to teach the mechanics of the game without overtly guiding players. Producer Loan Verneau: "We don't have markers that say, 'Go there! And now go here!'"**







ABOVE **The worlds are alive with the sound of music, with your signal scope picking up melodies played by astronauts you'll find around campfires across the various planets. Reach them and you can even toast a few marshmallows.**
TOP RIGHT **You have a rocket strapped to your suit which gives you more freedom to explore, though you need to use it carefully – on the moon you can accidentally shoot yourself into space.**
MAIN **The time limit per loop is more generous than it was in the IGF version, with playtests making clear it wasn't quite long enough to take in everything that's been added since. "But we didn't want to make it so long that you end up just waiting for shit to happen," Beachum laughs.**
BELOW LEFT **Lock onto a planet or moon and the autopilot can get you in close, but you're going to have to touch down manually. A top-down landing view helps you guide your craft in safely.**
BELOW RIGHT **Optional training in a zero-gravity cave on your home planet, Timber Hearth, is strongly recommended if you want to keep your craft shipshape. Learning how to manoeuvre around it is crucial if you want to repair damaged parts without wasting time**







They say you should always write what you know, and perhaps the same rule should apply to game-making, too. Certainly, there's something irresistibly, heartwarmingly personal about *Outer Wilds*: a firstperson space exploration game about a race of star-gazing pioneers that's being built by a studio that is similarly heading out into the great unknown.

Outer Wilds' development journey is loosely reflected by the game itself. It began as a student project, which was then "polished and tidied up", as creative director **Alex Beachum** puts it, for its entry to the IGF in 2015, where it won the Seumas McNally Grand Prize. "That was kind of a skeleton to what we've turned it into," he continues. "We took the original thing we planned and then filled in all the missing holes of the mysteries that just weren't finished in that version." That's all thanks to Annapurna Interactive, which has given the team at Mobius Digital the time and resources "to make it like the version we had in our heads."

As you explore the planet from which you embark on your quest, you'll uncover evidence of another group striving to realise their own ambitions. You play as a Hearthian, one of a race of blue-skinned amphibians keen to chart their modestly-sized solar system. To which end, they've built a small craft that feels as powerful and dangerous as an early spacecraft really should. Beachum cites the likes of science fiction films Apollo 13 and 2001 as inspirations, but there's also something of Damien Chazelle's movie First Man in the way it captures the physical sensation of being stuffed into what feels like a rocket-powered tin can, careening through the galaxy at ludicrous speeds. Thankfully, the videogame studio's camera is a little more stable than Chazelle's.

While the ship – if you can even call it that – is a little ramshackle, you can't say that for the controls, which are at once robust and reliable, while asking a little more of the player than simply aiming at a distant planet and hitting the autopilot button. Well, you can take that approach, but it only gets you so far; you'll need to master directional thrust to align yourself properly with your destination. Once you're close enough to a moving body, you can hold a button to lock onto it, matching your ship's trajectory to its rotation speed. "It was very necessary," Beachum says. "That was the thing that prevented it from being too hardcore."

That's partly because time in *Outer Wilds* is short. You've got a little over 20 realtime minutes to explore before a time loop takes you back to where you started, the idea being that you learn a little more about the solar system you're exploring each time, while some actions remain permanent: on your first visit, for example, you'll need to obtain launch codes before setting off, but you'll already have these for subsequent trips. Yet if the time-looping *Majora's Mask* feels like the most overt inspiration, Beachum says *Outer Wilds* has more in common with another *Zelda*. "It's more *The Wind Waker*," he says. "Just in that you're in this vehicle going around these islands and there's all these weird mysteries. You have characters talking about things they've seen and heard about, and you feel like you're investigating these myths or legends."

"We wanted to create a game where players were motivated by curiosity and nothing else"

And your homeworld does feel a lot like *Wind Waker*'s Outset Island. It's big and populous enough to make you wish you had more time to spend exploring there, while encouraging you to head off for the horizon with talk of distant signals and the like, teasing you towards the various moons and planets, where the real exploration can take place. In a game that's all about discovery, it would be remiss to reveal the exact nature of what you find there, but *Outer Wilds* is keen to find new ways to reward the inquisitive player. Which is why, refreshingly, there are no ship upgrades, no trinkets to watch out for – indeed, there are no collectables of any kind. "We wanted to create a game where players were motivated by curiosity and nothing else," Beachum smiles. Well, ours is certainly piqued. ■



A link between words

Paring down the script has been crucial in a game where you're against the clock – there's an option to pause time while you're reading, but Mobius Digital has still had to be economical with its text. From what we've seen it's nailed it: the dialogue is brisk and witty, never bogging you down with lengthy exchanges or creeds of exposition. "Every piece of writing in the game is either communicating a clue, doing a little bit of characterisation or setting up some important piece of world lore. Usually all three at once," Beachum says. It has provided some difficulties for localisation, too, as designer and producer **Loan Verneau** admits. "There's so much subtext information that we have to make sure is getting translated. That was quite a challenge, but a really interesting one."



SAYONARA WILD HEARTS

Simogo returns with its boldest, poppiest game so far

Publisher	Annapurna Interactive
Developer	Simogo
Format	Switch
Origin	Sweden
Release	2019

This stage was the first one Simogo completed, the timing coinciding with Annapurna Interactive arriving in town for the Nordic Game Conference. "We basically couldn't say no!" Flesser laughs



LEFT **Flesser warns not to expect the same narrative focus as the studio's more recent output, though he says it's partly inspired by a recent viewing of Last Year At Marienbad. "That movie has a very interesting narrative that is led by association rather than chronology," he teases.**
BELOW **The look of the characters has been influenced by the teddy girl and café racer subcultures: "They sort of all blended together when I created a drawing of a woman in a cool outfit wearing a mask, smoking a cigarette"**

ABOVE **One of the Fool's rival groups, the Howling Moons, engage her in a thrilling chase atop a three-headed wolf-bot. As you do.**
RIGHT **The tarot theme allows Simogo to effortlessly shift between modes of transport, since every element of the world – whether it be a character, a vehicle or a weapon – is based on the manifestation of a card**





SAYONARA WILD HEARTS

For Simogo, it always starts with a song. If the studio's last major release, *The Sailor's Dream* (with apologies to minimalist puzzler *SPL-T*) was a folk album masquerading as a videogame, then the Swedes' long-awaited comeback is a three-minute pop banger, a foot-tapping, high-tempo number with soaring vocals backed by dazzling dance routines.

It wasn't always thus. The original vision for *Sayonara Wild Hearts* was much darker; more nightmarish, even. Working alongside long-time collaborators Daniel Olsén and Jonathan Eng, Simogo's initial soundtrack experiments blended surf rock with world music. "Like taiko drums and Ethiopian influences," co-founder **Simon Flesser** explains. The game itself, meanwhile, was based on an idea he'd had of a universe built around tarot cards – a constant throughout his life, thanks to his family's interest in divination and astrology.

But something wasn't quite working, even as the first prototype began to take shape. Then one day, Flesser put on a playlist of upbeat pop music and had an epiphany. "I just said, 'No, this is it', while we were playing the demo," he says. "And we've been through a lot of iterations of the game since then."

A lot of iterations, and a lot of influences. There's a bit of everything in *Sayonara Wild Hearts*, Flesser says: from Tron to Carly Rae Jepsen, *Out Run* to *Ouendan*, Sailor Moon to Sia. Something about its speed, fluidity (it runs at a steady 60fps on Switch whether docked and undocked) and sheer energy reminds us of *Kid Icarus: Uprising*, and there's perhaps even a hint of *Killer7* – not only in its sharp sense of style and cinematic eye, but also its streamlined control scheme.

"I was playing a lot of really simple arcade games," Flesser says, "And I was starting to think that it's such a shame how complicated games have become. They're like spaceships to control. You look at something like *Uncharted* or *God Of War*, and they have a million buttons." He acknowledges that Simogo might not have the budget or staff to make a *Bayonetta*, but is hoping to capture a similar sense of spectacle and pace with just cardinal directions and a single button.

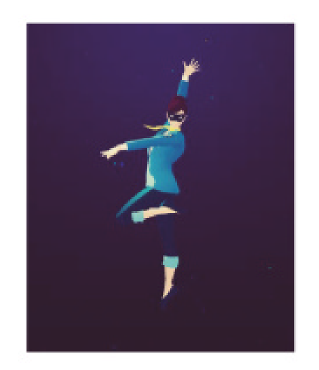
And heavens, it's quick. You play as a young biker, speeding through a dreamscape as her alter ego, The Fool. It's a pseudo-on-rails action game where you have full directional control, but while the level design flows in time with the soundtrack, like *Rez* this isn't strictly a rhythm game. At first, Flesser was dead set on excluding any traditional elements ("no lose state, no pickups") but without them, the game lost some of its edge. "Basically, we said, 'Let's just try and make this the most videogame-y we can make a videogame,' and rebooted it, and everything fell into place."

It's a twitch game, then, a replayable score-chaser, but one that seamlessly segues into short cutscenes mid-flow – usually to present new mechanical twists without letting the pace drop. "It's mostly for enemies, actually," Flesser says. "It's like a cool cutscene that introduces the fact that a rival will now start to shoot fireballs or what have you."

> ***"Let's just try and make this the most videogame-y we can make a videogame"***

Though Simogo is a little vague on some of the details – suffice to say, alongside the bike pursuits you'll find dance-combat set-pieces and even flying sections – that's partly because Flesser is keen to surprise players, and also because no two levels of *Sayonara Wild Hearts* are alike. "Our motto throughout the entire project has been, 'Every stage is a bonus stage'. You know that feeling how bonus stages are always more exciting to get to than regular stages, because they switch everything up? We wanted to capture that feeling so players are excited every time they start a new level."

That title, then, an allusion to Flesser's own concern that this could be the last game Simogo makes, seems awfully premature. Even so, he says, "There's definitely a sense of 'Let's make this one count'." There may be a lot riding on The Fool, but even as part of a catalogue that includes three **Edge** 9s, the studio's "most videogame-y videogame" to date could well be a new high note. ■



Stars align

Any good pop song needs a strong vocal, and Flesser says it was only with the addition of singer-songwriter Linnea Olsson that everything really started to come together. With Daniel Olsén supplying instruments and production for Jonathan Eng's vocal tracks, Flesser began to look in earnest for a singer. As fate would have it, almost a year to the day after their first meeting at a record store gig, where a star-struck Flesser asked if Olsson would like to collaborate on a videogame, she emailed him to ask if he was still interested. "It was really magical how that clicked into place," he says. "We sent her a track, she basically loved it, and that was that. I'm a fan of Linnea's solo work so it's been a real honour."



Developer/publisher
Format PC
Origin China
Release TBA



RING OF ELYSIUM

PUBG meets Steep in Tencent's free-to-play battle royale

The game industry has proved time and again since *PUBG*'s unlikely ascendance that it is perfectly possible to match it for quality, and even exceed it, without garnering the merest fraction of its audience. *Ring Of Elysium*, from planet Earth's biggest game company Tencent, might prove the exception to that rule. Already possessing a player base large enough to crack Steam's top 20 during Early Access, it evidently has the power to lure some old stalwarts out from the comfort of their Erangel hidey-holes.

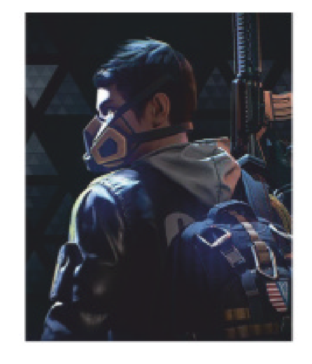
The major deviation from battle royale 101 here is in traversal. Rather than leap out of the plane to escape the voice-chat DJs of *PUBG* or board the *Fortnite* battle bus, in *Ring Of Elysium* you choose a location on the map and appear there. If that sounds like it removes a little of the giddy chaos from your typical round, that's because it does. Very little tends to happen in the opening couple of minutes here, and while that's on one hand a refreshing change from having one's skull cracked open by a barefoot fellow with a frying pan, on the other it's a missed opportunity.

Three loadouts are available before you spawn. The Glider pack endows you with a pistol and some ammo in addition to the titular glider, offering great mobility but limited carrying space; the Skiing pack comes with a snowboard and a pistol and ammo, intended as the balanced mobility/capacity build; and the Climbing pack's pick and shotgun let you scale icy walls and do huge close-range damage. Although there's an undeniable tradeoff of first-minute chaos for serene snowboarding, *Ring Of Elysium* does its level best to make that tradeoff worth it by letting you pop stunts on your board while you cruise its wintry map. And although it doesn't feel as smooth as the snowboarding barometer of our time, Ubisoft's *Steep*, it's satisfying enough to warrant inclusion. Statistically you're almost certain to die anyway: you might as well be pulling off a backflip in mid-air when it happens. And it makes combat more dynamic. When you're under fire from an unseen opponent, the last thing they're expecting is for you to glide away on winter sports equipment.

It's certainly not the natural progression of the genre, though. Driving a car or a motorbike is usually perilous enough – and rest assured there are motor vehicles throughout the map – so as *Ring Of Elysium* evolves, it needs to demonstrate that the mountain climbing and winter sports aren't a gimmick, but an essential tool. At this stage in development, they feel somewhere between the two. Given that you're able to spawn anywhere and that the game map feels smaller than most battle-royale venues, covering great distances at speed is less of a concern here than in other games in the genre.

> ***There's an undeniable tradeoff of first-minute chaos for serene snowboarding***

As with *PUBG*'s mobile launch, in which Tencent also had a stake, bots are a noticeable presence here. In your first match they make up 100 per cent of the 59-strong opposition, and as you progress the game lets you know that it'll introduce smaller and smaller numbers of them until you're fighting, presumably, on an all-human server. At this stage in development the bots are fearsomely accurate and considerably less fun to play against than human opponents. After all, it's our tendency to experiment and do things just for the fun of it that makes battle-royale gaming such a joy in its best moments. Baiting buildings for players so that they think they reached a house that hasn't been looted yet is *PUBG*'s giddiest thrill – but you can't bait a bot. There is some promise in *Ring Of Elysium*'s frankly bizarre blend of winter sports sandbox and killing fields, though, and a sizeable player base banking on that promise coming to fruition. ■



Top ten

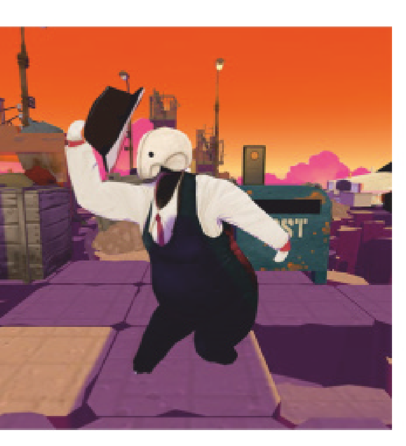
Tencent is perhaps more famous in the west for buying up chunks of the game industry than it is for making games. Founded in 2003, it owns 100 per cent of Riot Games, an undisclosed minority stake in Activision Blizzard, a five per cent stake in Ubisoft, 11.5 per cent of *PUBG* maker Bluehole and 40 per cent of Epic Games, to name just a few of the big hitters within its portfolio. It's already a big name in battle-royale gaming, then, albeit one mentioned far more in investor calls than conference streams – and is an attractive partner for any company looking to break into China, where games can only be officially released through a native company.



TOP **There's very little time for sightseeing in these icy climes. With other players so mobile, it's rarely wise to stop and drink in a vista.** ABOVE **Monster trucks absolutely roar along the road. Getting around at top speed comes with definite tradeoff, however.** ABOVE LEFT **Weapon feedback feels noticeably snappier than in *PUBG*. But is that a real human you're shooting at, or a bot? That uncertainty does kill the buzz a bit.** LEFT **You won't believe us when we tell you that this doesn't feel dissonant when it's experienced in the middle of a hectic battle-royale round, and that's okay. We wouldn't either**

Developer Kong Orange
Publisher Daedalic Entertainment
Format PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One
Origin Denmark
Release 2019



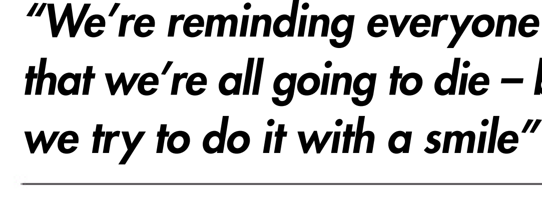


FELIX THE REAPER

A killer puzzle game making all the right moves

We're not sure what Felix is meant to be made of exactly, but one thing's for sure – this pillowy potato sack can't half cut a rug. Watching the big lug don his headphones and dance across a level to a disco beat is joyous stuff. His movements are absolutely infectious: as his curvaceous body bumps and grinds to a funky bassline, his disembodied head bouncing on his shoulders while he cha-cha-slides into the next square, we begin to feel the rhythm too. This may be a game of grids and logic, but its hard edges are padded with irresistible whimsy.

Most of it comes from its cuddly hero, Felix. He's the inspired work of designer **Mikkel Maltesen**, and is in fact an agent of death, travelling through time in a magical elevator to manipulate environments and cause enough accidents to keep the Ministry Of Death happy. Initially, Felix started life as a more traditional design, a realistic-looking skeleton covered in brown skin in line with the famous Lübecker Totentanz frieze depicting the dance of death. "It felt stiff, and a bit too obvious," Maltesen says. So the team


"We're reminding everyone that we're all going to die – but we try to do it with a smile"

began widening their interpretation of what a Grim Reaper could be. "He has been a small skeleton elf, a forest dead-spirit with antlers and a gold-chain hip-hop dude in a jumpsuit made of human flesh." Then, Kong Orange's main historian spotted a depiction of death as an office clerk. The appeal was clear.

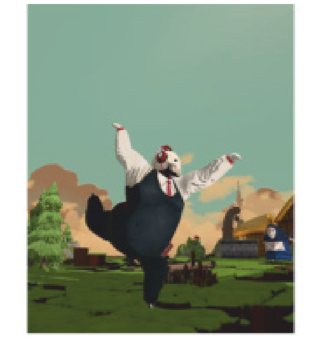
"Felix is basically a shy, grey office mouse," Maltesen says, "but when he's out in the field reaping, he shows a different side and dances as a self-confident diva." That's putting it mildly. Our mission is grim, if humorous: we must transport various objects across a grid to particular squares, *Sokoban*-style, in order to set up a Mouse Trap-esque contraption and cause a hunter's death. And whether we have Felix carrying barrels or hitting switches that reanimate skeletal horses to pull carts, he does it all in gloriously campy style. The animations are wonderful: a hip-hop arm wave here, a pirouette or grand jeté there. "We worked with dancers of both genders when developing Felix's dance moves," Maltesen says. "It's been of great advantage that we designed Felix so voluptuous – though I must admit that our animators have often cursed his lack of feet and hands."

But no matter how footloose and fancy-free Felix may be, there's another mechanical twist to consider here. We're only able to move in the shadows cast by the level's scenery, but we can move them at a 90-degree angle and spot the always-shaded squares key to creating a safe path. Well, safe for us, at least. After five levels of ordering moves correctly, and setting up comedy scenarios, the death sequence begins, and our target gets his ironic – and gently funny – comeuppance.

It's quite the mish-mash of themes, then, even before we discover Felix's other big motivation for working, dancing and being: Ministry Of Life employee Betty The Maiden, who's captured his squishy heart from afar. In fact, there's so much at play here – love, death, dance, shadows, *Sokoban* – that *Felix The Reaper*'s kitchen-sink approach runs the risk of feeling a little too much at times. Then again, you try telling that to this exuberant bean bag. And the traditional approach to puzzling does a fine job of acting the skeleton, anyway, propping up *Felix The Reaper*'s cuddlier creative excesses.

In fact, we may have inadvertently hit upon the point of the whole thing. "When you play *Felix*, you actually continue the tradition of dancing with death," Maltesen says. "In a sense, the game itself becomes a memento mori. We're reminding everyone that we're all going to die – but we try to do it with a smile. The end might not have to be so sad. Why not dance and have fun?" ■





Death warmed up

Felix The Reaper's friendlier approach to death is rooted in the cultural tradition of memento mori, as is its charming art style. "Memento mori typically pictures beautiful things in decay, so that's the reason why most of the game's world looks as if it is falling apart," Maltesen says, pointing to the half-dissolved buildings and animals on the board. "Still, I love colours, and we decided to go for a clear and vibrant colour scheme to contrast the gloominess of the game." Felix's journey through different historical periods is informed by art; he'll only visit eras in which the dance of death was culturally depicted. But Kong Orange has more ideas in store: "Mexico, for instance, has a great tradition of celebrating death. I really hope that we will be able to send him there in a follow-up!"

TOP **Later levels will see more traversal mechanics. Kong Orange has recently taken to Twitter to ask fans to name its teleporter pads.** ABOVE **There's a Tim Burton-esque comedic creepiness to the human characters. They're clumsy souls, too**

TOP **Each level is a paused moment in time, with Felix tiptoeing merrily around some very funny tableaus.** ABOVE **There's a handy toggle function to turn on for changing shadow positions. Flicking more quickly between the two can help with tougher puzzles.** RIGHT **Some more modern precedents for Felix's office clerk look include Twilight Zone episode 'One For The Angels' and 1996 Japanese film Shall We Dance.**



THE LAST CAMPFIRE

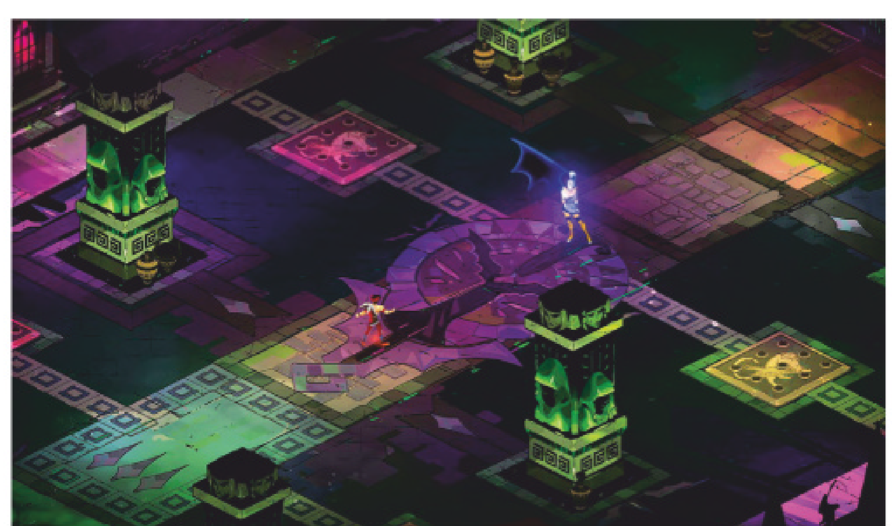
Developer/publisher Hello Games **Format** PC **Origin** UK **Release** TBA



The *No Man's Sky* developer is styling this as the first Hello Games Short – a Pixar-riffing label for games that will "foster creativity and new voices in the studio," according to Hello founder Sean Murray. You may have heard the voices behind *The Last Campfire* before, however: Chris Symonds and Steven Burgess were part of the Frontier Developments team that made WiiWare launch title *LostWinds*. This, too, is a charming adventure game, which Murray says is about "a lost Ember trapped in a puzzling place, searching for meaning and a way home," and is inspired by the likes of *Journey* and *Brothers: A Tale Of Two Sons*.

HADES

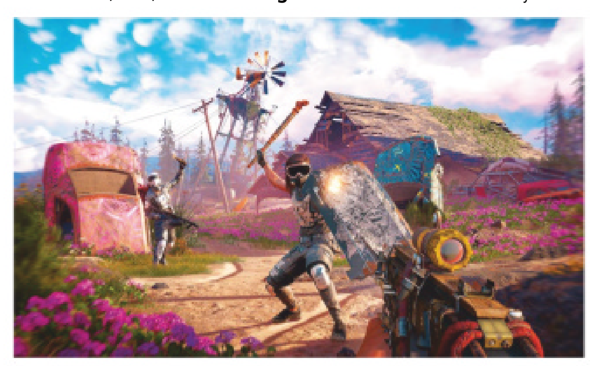
Developer/publisher Supergiant Games **Format** PC **Origin** US **Release** TBA



Shortly after the release of *Transistor*, we asked Supergiant co-founder Greg Kasavin if the studio was ever going to break out of its cosy action-RPG niche. In response we've had the brilliant party RPG/sports game hybrid *Pyre*, and now comes *Hades*, a realtime action Roguelike that's available now in Early Access through the new Epic Games store. Predictably, it's an absolute cracker. Greg, and all at Supergiant, we're sorry we ever doubted you.

FAR CRY NEW DAWN

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Montreal)
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** Canada **Release** February 15



Picking up after the events of *Far Cry 5*, which saw nukes falling on Montana, this looks like *Far Cry* doing what it does best: abandoning all pretence of being anything but an absurd sandbox full of systems colliding and things exploding. All well and good, but February feels far too soon for another one.

AWAY: JOURNEY TO THE UNEXPECTED

Developer/publisher Aurélien Regard
Format PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One **Origin** France **Release** Feb 5



Creator Aurélien Regard describes *Away* as a "feel-good FPS", an anime-inspired adventure in which you can recruit people you encounter to your cause. Regard has brought on four collaborators: the soundtrack is a Tokyo production, while *Rayman Legends* level designer Jim Genisson is also involved.

JUDGMENT

Developer Yakuza Studio **Publisher** Sega
Format PS4 **Origin** Japan **Release** Summer



Firstly, we preferred the name *Judge Eyes*; secondly, that's not how you spell judgement. Still, at least Toshihiro Nagoshi's *Yakuza*-but-lawyers game is heading west. For the first time since the first *Yakuza*, we'll be able to explore Kamurocho with English audio – though the Japanese audio will be an option.

SUBSCRIBE TO

EDGE



WHEREVER YOU ARE IN THE WORLD

Quarterly prices

IN THE UK? SEE PAGE 70





	PRINT	DIGITAL	PRINT+DIGITAL
Europe	€28	€9	€31
US	$28	$9	$31
Rest of the world	$30	$9	$33

Choose a **print subscription** and get every issue of **Edge** delivered to your door for less than you'd pay in the shops and with exclusive subscriber-only covers.

Choose a **digital subscription** and get every issue of **Edge** on iOS and Android delivered on the UK on-sale date.

Get the best value with the **print + digital package**: instant access to the digital edition on the UK on-sale date, plus a print copy with exclusive, subscriber-only cover, to your door.

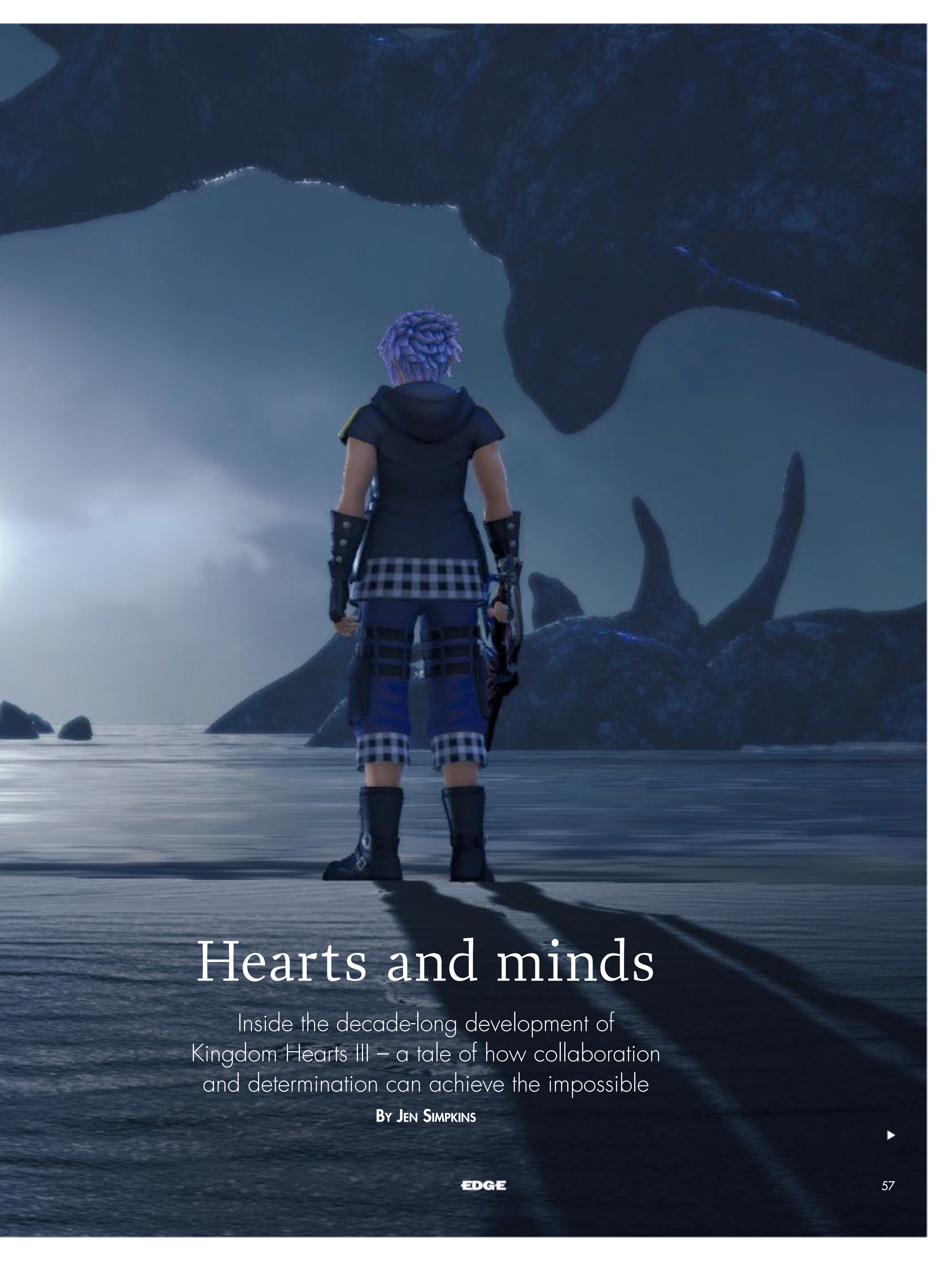
SUBSCRIBE NOW myfavouritemagazines.co.uk/edgesubs

#328

VIDEOGAME CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT, PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY







Hearts and minds

Inside the decade-long development of Kingdom Hearts III – a tale of how collaboration and determination can achieve the impossible

By Jen Simpkins



Thank Buzz Lightyear that *Kingdom Hearts III* exists. That's a bizarre sentence – and as such, entirely appropriate. Square Enix's long-awaited RPG is a hybrid world in which the impossible is somehow made reality. Keyblade-wielding hero Sora stands shoulder to shoulder with Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck, and runs through environments plucked from some of the most beloved animated films of all time. It is playable Disney, shot through with anime styling. It is weird. It shouldn't exist.

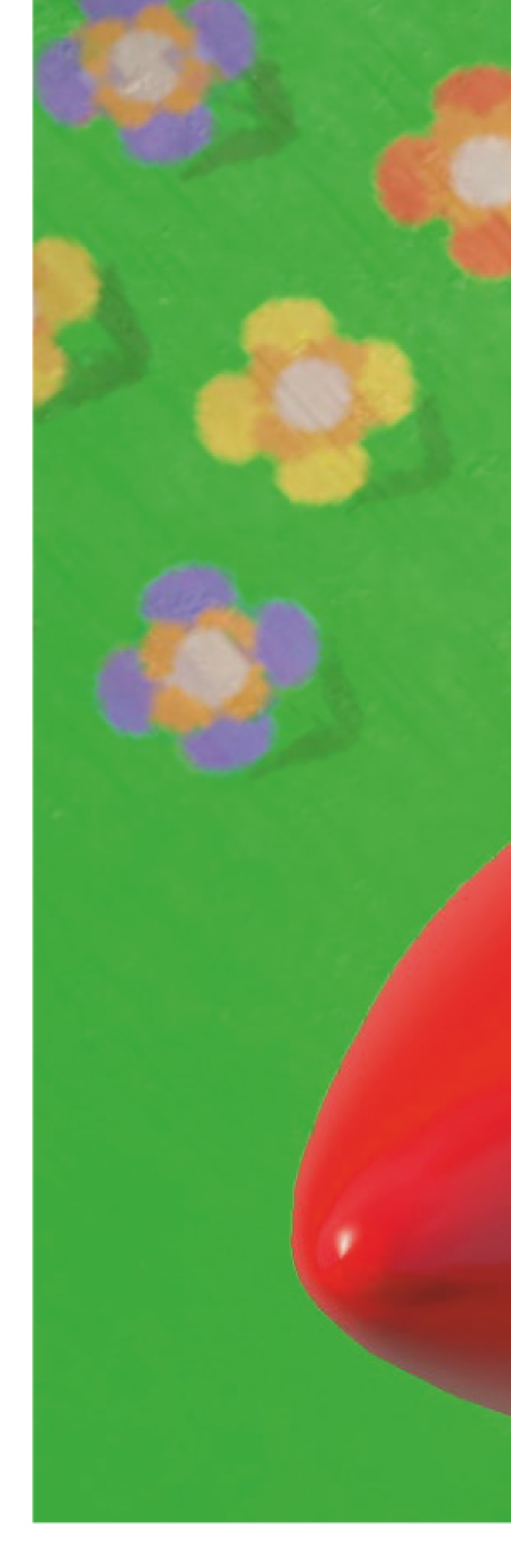
Indeed, it's taken years – more than ten of them – to make it happen. This is the result of a painstaking collaboration between Square Enix and The Walt Disney Company, two sets of very different but equally perfectionist creators. Keeping both sides happy is no easy task: Disney is not exactly famed for its laissez-faire approach to its IP portfolio. Square, meanwhile, is protective of its own carefully constructed worlds, the *Kingdom Hearts* universe in particular cherished by a legion of fans who connect deeply to its story.

So yes, the collaboration took a while. The endless back-and-forth between artists and their own ideas of what this game should be, an unexpected change of engines early on in development, the sheer size of the team required to make a *Kingdom Hearts* game more open than any previous series entry – all of this further complicated an already complex project. And then there's **Tetsuya Nomura**, a man so committed to his vision of the perfect Disney RPG that unless it's exactly right, he'd rather it didn't exist at all.

For the series director, making *Kingdom Hearts III* without the Toy Story licence was unthinkable. "After we were done with *Kingdom Hearts II* and were starting to consider *III*, we started talks with Disney," he tells us. "I remember saying, 'If we can't use Pixar, then we can't have a third game.' It's that important to the game series. The whole world loves Toy Story – everybody feels the appeal of that story and those characters. So yeah, at the very beginning I directly said to them, "If we can't get this, I don't want to do it.""

Everything sprang from Nomura's personal love of Buzz and Woody's animated adventures, and his insistence that it form the backbone of the game. Toy Story was the first IP that Square entered into negotiations with Pixar for, and had the longest approval process by far. "I wrote a general ▶

"I remember saying, 'If we can't use Pixar, then we can't have a third game.' It's that important to the game series"





Game *Kingdom Hearts III*
Developer/publisher Square Enix
Format PS4, Xbox One
Release January 29





When it comes to creating Disney worlds, faithfulness to the source material is at the forefront of the *Kingdom Hearts* team's mind. Surprisingly, the strict parameters allow for plenty of creativity – with Disney's approval, of course. The Rocket Ruckus attack riffs on the Toy Story film, allowing Sora to dish out sparkling attacks for a short time before he sends it exploding into enemies



With Sora and friends changing their appearance according to the world they're currently inhabiting, *Kingdom Hearts III*'s character designers were kept busy with fresh challenges. Key characters would need to retain their iconic silhouettes, while adapting to suit each world's style. Making Sora's spiky hair into a weird thatch of webbed flippers is a particularly inspired touch





outline of the story and I submitted it to Pixar," he says. "It took them several years to okay the story and the character designs." Perhaps not entirely sensibly, this make-or-break starting point had ended up functioning as the testing ground for the nascent relationship.

Trust had to be built up over time, but Square couldn't talk to Pixar directly: it had to go through Disney's people, who would come and go from year to year. "You know, this is ultimately just a discussion between human beings," Nomura says. "Previous to *Kingdom Hearts III*, I think these companies kind of saw it more as like, secondary rights permissions. They saw it more as a product, like you would a branded toy or something. This time, it was creator to creator – it was somebody who had made this animation, and somebody who was making this game. We were communicating with each other, myself and these people, so that added an extra level of complexity, because each creator has their own desires, ideas and concepts."

Kingdom Hearts III had to be a Disney game, of course, but it also had to be a Square Enix one. The logistics were going to be tricky, but at least thematically the world of Toy Story suited the mashup well. "We were talking to [Pixar story supervisor] Jason Katz," co-director **Tai Yasue** says, "and what he said was he wanted us to make a Toy Story world – a toy store – that they couldn't." The result is Galaxy Toys, a gorgeous virtual playground filled with both recognisable Disney elements and plenty of artistic references to Japanese toy culture. A prize dispenser in the centre towers over a shrunken Sora and friends: run up the inner ramp, and your choice of three rideable rails whizzes you off to a new explorable area. It's somewhere between gumball and gacha machine, a neat fusion of east and west.

And then there are the Gigas, the drivable mechs that Nomura designed and pushed hard to be included. "Yeah, I think the first thing [that he concepted] was the robots," Yasue laughs. "I shouldn't say Gundam here, but yeah, they're inspired by that sort of culture. We sort of wanted it to be true to what we do – Square Enix-like. And Pixar was actually very open to that. We had this back and forth with Pixar: it placed a lot of importance on the toys. They're robots, but they're also toys, so they really wanted that incorporated." The first designs were even built in a kind of ▶



"We wanted to be true to what we do – Square Enix-like. And Pixar was actually very open to that. We had this back and forth"



virtual cardboard with Unreal Engine 4's blueprint feature, maintaining a temporary, toy-like feel from the off as the team experimented with how the Gigas would move, fight and shoot. The result is delightful. Mechs swing their arms and rotate their torsos in a wonderfully jerky manner. Look closer, and you can see the screws holding them together: pop open the hatch to climb inside, and the sound isn't metallic, but pleasingly plasticky.

It was proof positive to Pixar that Square could pay homage to one of its most treasured IPs while adding its own sense of individuality into the design. In fact, incorporating original elements into a Disney IP was far easier than altering what was already there. While Square was given plenty of leeway with regards to new toy designs, attempting any change to the standard Toy Story narrative by integrating it into that of *Kingdom Hearts III* proved difficult. Indeed, each of the Disney worlds in *Kingdom Hearts III* – Pirates Of The Caribbean's Port Royal, Frozen's Kingdom Of Arendelle, Monsters, Inc's Monstropolis and Big Hero 6's San Fransokyo among them – presented its own challenge. "Each title has a different team in charge of it," Nomura says. "The storyline is the very heart of Toy Story. Whereas with Monsters, Inc, it's more about the world that they've built. So we'd be told, 'Oh, well, actually there aren't monsters of this colour,' or 'There are no monsters that have eyes like that', or 'The monsters in this world wouldn't use that word.'"

Indeed, if you thought Nomura was a perfectionist – well, you'd be right. "I'm a bit more laid-back," Yasue laughs. "I get a lot of leeway to do a lot of the battles, so there's a lot of creative freedom in doing that, not a lot of restrictions. But Nomura is very interested, for example, in a character's face." Yasue, as co-director was working in a different sphere to Nomura's obsessive control over the game's art and story, but often found himself relaying messages between Nomura and the designers. "We have a lot of these back and forths, for example, on the colour of a character's eyes, or the space between his mouth and nose," he says. "Nomura and [Toru] Yamazaki, the character designer, communicate a lot. I'm sort of in the middle, doing the back and forth. Things like the whiteness of Sora's eyes – there's a highlight, right, in his eyes – and not just Sora, but all the characters. How clouds look, how the ripples are ▶

The Gigas proved Square could pay homage to one of Pixar's most treasured IPs while adding its own sense of individuality



Olaf from Frozen is one of the characters voiced by the original actor from the film. It's very noticeable when stand-ins are used, unfortunately – Rapunzel from Tangled is quite off

Blue sea thinking

Nomura was "really picky", he tells us, about the realistic art style in the Pirates Of The Caribbean world. Naturally, making hyper-detailed versions of Disney characters was bound to be complicated. Donald Duck's down ended up being hand-stacked, feather by feather, polygon by polygon. Disney was very anxious about its characters fitting this kind of style: everyone agreed that too many details would lead to the characters starting to look "too creepy". (We can't help but wonder about the metric it's going by, however, once we notice the tiny veins in Goofy's eyeballs.) The environment of the Pirates world, too, was challenging to tune. Based on the third film in the series, the colour palette was made to look deliberately washed-out to match the film's complex colouring and lighting. The typical fantasy blue sky, for instance, was put aside in favour of a more grey-blue cast.







In the naval battles in the Pirates Of The Caribbean world, you're controlling the ship itself rather than Sora. A new kind of combat system proved "difficult to tune", Yasue says, which helped make this world one of the most difficult and costly to put together

when you walk in water." We wonder just how specific one can reasonably be about ripples. Yasue laughs again: "It has to look good, I guess. Rich. He's very detail-oriented."

So is Disney. When it came to design, the ultimate aim was to recreate the Disney films almost exactly. While previous games in the series were made by designers watching the films over and over again, scrutinising them and copying the details, *Kingdom Hearts III* was to be far more accurate and would require permission to use Disney's own resources. Several problems immediately presented themselves. Firstly, the tools Disney uses to create animations are, naturally, not the same as those used by Square to make games. With the polygon counts of Disney's basic animation models too low to use in a game, and those of the final film versions far too high, everything in the Disney worlds – characters, animations, environments – had to be remade from scratch. Disney is choosy about the data it shares, too. Square received only the basic polygon shapes of a character, with guidelines for where the various hair and materials should be, but not the content itself. Square's artists would have to recreate shaders, hair and material themselves.

Disney might not be prepared to share details such as the specific pattern of snowflakes on the veil covering Elsa's dress, but Square Enix's recreation would have to be to Disney standards. It was back to studying the films. The data for how material would drape needed to be contextualised: Disney sent over the data for a fully stretched-out veil, so as to convey the correct dimensions, but Square itself needed to program the physics of how it naturally fell around the character. Disney uses cross-simulation to automatically calculate the movement of hair and fabrics in its films, but for *Kingdom Hearts III*, these materials would have to have hundreds of individual, physics-programmed 'bones', added by hand to produce an animation quality similar to the films. Elsa contains 348 individual bones. Pirates Of The Caribbean's Tia Dalma, with her multiple, intricate and more realistic layers of clothing, is packing about 700.

Weekly teleconferences between the individual *Kingdom Hearts III* teams and Disney creators helped keep the lines of communication open. Disney would send over the data it was willing to share; the *Kingdom Hearts III* teams worked to complete it as accurately as possible using their own resources; the assets would then be sent back to Disney for appraisal, who would feed back any requested changes, and the back-and-forth would continue until the finished result was up to par.

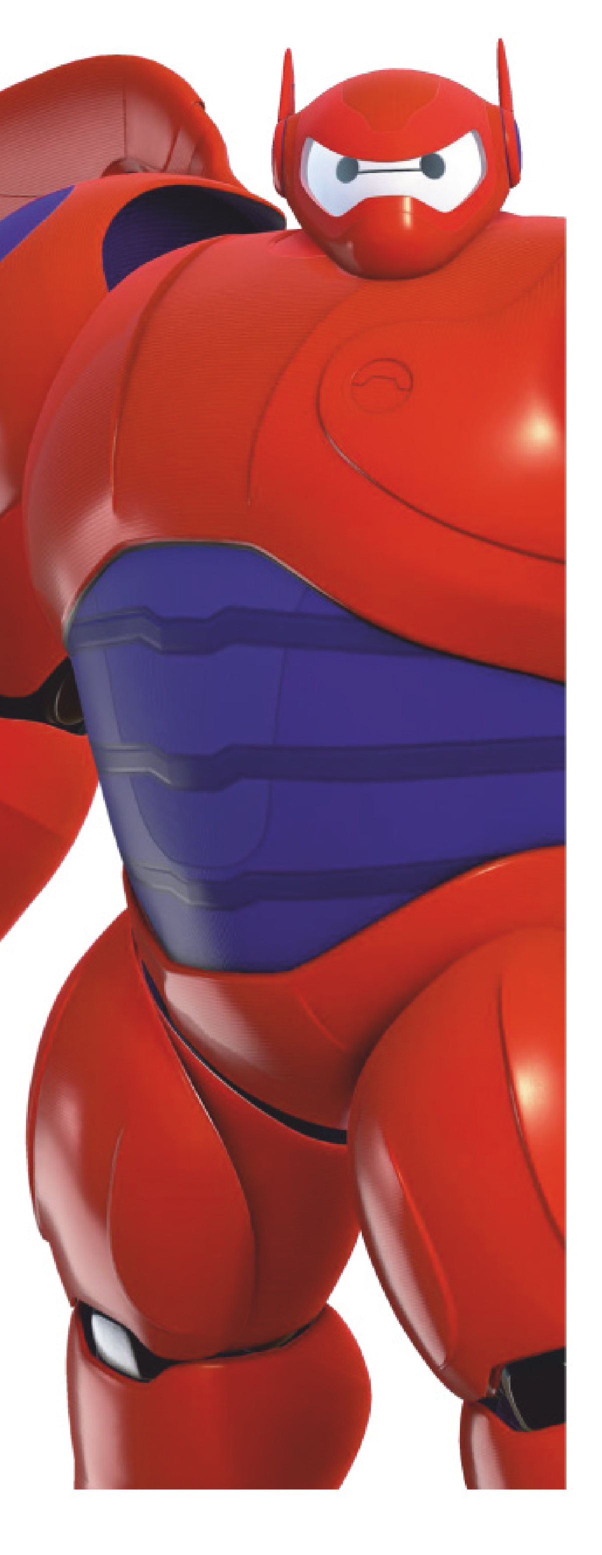
In-engine cutscenes drew particular scrutiny from Disney. It would ask for minute alterations such as insisting a character show less teeth, having their eyelids move differently or their line of sight adjusted (Pixar's unexpected notes on the importance of a character's line of sight, the developers tell us, were instrumental in raising the general quality of the animation throughout the game). Surprisingly, then, it was less that Disney became impatient with the amount of time it was taking to perfect the details of the game: if anything, it was the opposite. "To be honest, it was us that were worried about how long things were taking, not them," Nomura says. "They weren't rushing us along or anything – conversely, we were trying to rush them."

Which is not to say Nomura and team were sitting on their hands waiting for the phone to ring. As fascinating a tale as this back-and-forth between two creative companies on different continents may be, Square Enix had its own internal problems to surmount. A decade is a long time in videogame development, after all; no team has the luxury of sitting still while the world outside races past. And with *Kingdom Hearts III* – which was always intended as a title for this generation, Nomura tells us, despite development beginning in the PS3 era – destined to be the series' biggest and most technically demanding yet, iterations to both the game and the structure of the team were sorely needed. "The basics were the same, right, we just wanted a fun game – but it was just more vast," Yasue says.

In terms of both cost and personnel, Toy Story's world would prove challenging to create, with so many original toys needing to be designed; the more realistically rendered Pirates Of The Caribbean world was, too, both because of the difficulty in matching the live-action film as closely as possible and the nature of the player's interactions with it. "It's battle-based, but it's not with Sora: you're riding a ship, and so you have these ship battles that are very different. And with exploration – swimming in the sea, and exploring caverns – you have to be really careful because people get lost." *Kingdom Hearts III*'s ▶



With the polygon counts of Disney's animation models too low to use in a videogame, absolutely everything in the Disney worlds had to be remade



environmental art director tells us that making the ocean was "almost like making a whole other game."

It was clear that the usual top-down structure of most Japanese game-development companies wasn't going to suit the needs of such a huge, next-gen undertaking: with much of *Kingdom Hearts III*'s appeal due to sheer breadth and variety, it being assembled in parts by internal teams and external contractees, with the counsel of Disney creators, there'd have to be a different approach to team management. And the change was far from simple. Square's internal communications, for instance, were in dire need of a refresh. "There was a lot of difficulty communicating, I guess, because there were so many people and individual teams," Yasue says. "Connecting that, and communicating to set clear goals was very difficult. If you don't set them, people get the wrong idea."

The solution was to begin holding weekly meetings for each team. Computers would be hooked up to the two big screens in the Osaka headquarters' break room, and the team as a whole would be shown the week's progress for their section of the game, and invited to provide feedback. "And we'd iterate on that," Yasue explains. "For the player, for example, each action, each move, we showed it to everyone else, and actually played it. Move by move. We'd discuss the motions, animations, effects. I think it gave people a sense that we were united, that everyone was taking part." The presentations were relayed remotely to the team in Tokyo, and a new internal video channel was created for *Kingdom Hearts III*, where Square's own homemade development documentaries could share information throughout the company on each team's progress.

It may have taken a while for Square to adjust to a new structure, but the time investment was instrumental in making a game of this scale with the quality and attention to detail needed. Change was tough, but necessary. So it proved, too, in the more technical aspects of the game's creation: all told, *Kingdom Hearts III*'s development spanned three game engines across the decade. Experiments in gameplay design began in Unreal Engine 3, Yasue tells us: design goals were decided upon, after which production officially began in Square's own in-house engine, Luminous. "There was a lot of collaboration between us and the Advanced Technology Division in Tokyo," he says. "We learned a lot from that – how to make triple-A games for this age, this generation."

After a full year of creating *Kingdom Hearts III* in Luminous, however, management suddenly announced that development would be restarted in Unreal Engine 4. "We had our own company reasons, essentially," Nomura says. "It wasn't something that we had anything to do with, it was decided higher up." A common-sense executive decision, perhaps: in this day and age, shifting to thirdparty tech with a community and support system as solid as Epic's makes sense both financially and practically. With the Luminous-powered *Final Fantasy XV* dragging its heels, moving *Kingdom Hearts III* to Unreal Engine 4 may have been a safer bet. And then there were the artistic freedoms it would offer.

"The thing with Unreal Engine 4 is it's really easy to experiment, gameplay-wise," Yasue says, referring back to Toy Story's Gigas robots. "We didn't need any assets to start off, so the game designers that aren't artists at all could actually start to test the game."

The change was disruptive nonetheless. "We had to learn a lot," Yasue says. "When we started using Unreal Engine 4, we had these study groups – well, not study groups, but we all sort of... There's a tutorial," he laughs. He recalls a studio full of game designers, unfamiliar with the new engine, poring over Unreal documentation and making their own learning tasks for each of their teams to complete. "I even did that," he says. "I made my own robot, a robot that changed shape. We never used it in the game, we were just testing it out. We had contests too, I remember. Each game designer made something, and we sort of compared it. And this had nothing to do with the game." He agrees that the reset contributed to the overall length of development "because we had to learn about the engine. That was part of the development timeline, and was something that contributed to and affected the schedule."

It still appears to be something of a sore point for Nomura. "It was a whole year that we had to kind of rewind and restart," he says, before adding that the change was ultimately a beneficial one. "As a dev tool, Unreal Engine 4 is kind of an all-in-one – it's got all of the stuff that is needed in it, it's used around the world, and we also got really great support from [Epic]. They were very helpful through the entire process." Was it a question ▶

"It was a whole year that we had to kind of rewind and restart," Nomura says, before adding that the change was ultimately a beneficial one





Hiro shooter

Big Hero 6's San Fransokyo is a great fit for *Kingdom Hearts III*: its fusion of old and new, as well as east and west, a poetic summation of the game as a whole. Yet again, this world provided an opportunity to exercise some creative licence with minigames and mechanics exclusive to that world. "Hiro is an inventor, so we wanted something that was invented," Yasue tells us. "So we came up with an augmented reality device that Sora places on as a visor. And using that, we have San Fransokyo – but you're looking at it through a sort of AR visor." While it's a neat way to introduce a "mix of technology", we can't help but think it canny: presumably Square can get away with more outlandish additions if they're merely projections on a world.



Nomura had his sights set on a Big Hero 6 world as soon as Disney shared early materials with him. "Big Hero 6's story is a moving story that involves a robot, which is something that really fits well with the *Kingdom Hearts* world," he tells us. This man *really* likes robots



Square had a dedicated planner for fighting movements, who would study the films and ascertain how a character might move and fight: Rapunzel, naturally, would use her hair. A plan would then be created, and sent to Disney for approval

of having to go backward in order to go forward? He nods. "It would have been a different story if the team making Luminous had been members of the *Kingdom Hearts* team. But they were a different team, so that did make things a bit more difficult."

As the years rolled on, the *Kingdom Hearts III* team began to see the industry – and wider world – change around the game they were making. "But the process of making this game took so long that we had to decide early on what we were going to include," Nomura says, explaining that the full roster of worlds was set in stone at a very early stage. "Up until that point, maybe some of them we'd started making, and some of them we hadn't yet started making. But Disney would give us information about the new movies they had coming out before they were ever out, and they'd show us things that were partially done." Such was the case with Big Hero 6, which Nomura was instantly drawn to for its novelty in the context of the *Kingdom Hearts* series: the superhero theme and the portrayal of a near-future world. His criteria for potential worlds is simple: "It really doesn't matter to me whether or not they're going to be popular, it's just about whether the game is going to benefit from adding them. In past *Kingdom Hearts* games, we've included a number of more minor titles. It's not only about what's interesting, it's also about variety.

"Of course, even after that fixed point when we have decided what the worlds are going to be, occasionally there are Disney things that come up afterwards and I'm like, 'Ah, I wish I could put that in there.'" He is, naturally, loath to give any details about which particular Disney IPs he regrets not being able to include in *Kingdom Hearts III*. "We might still use them in the future. Personally I'd like to see them used for a new game. I mean, we did just get finished with this one, but still."

Even after a turbulent decade on *Kingdom Hearts III*, Nomura still has half an eye on the future of the series. He's clearly fuelled by his own love of – and eerie creative affinity with – Disney's work. His perfectionist vision has informed the majority of the development of this game, and will continue to for as long as he works at Square Enix. "To be completely honest, that hasn't changed since game one – since day one," he says. "There have been a lot of people who have said as the hardware changes, we're going to have to change things. As the way of creating things changes, we're going to have to change our management style, and there's a lot to keep up with. But this company, in at least one way, hasn't changed since it was called Squaresoft. We want to make fun stuff; we want to make cool stuff. And the team here in Osaka working on *Kingdom Hearts III* are all of that same mindset – they just wanted to make something good."

Yasue concurs. "Nomura wants it to be perfect, I want it to be perfect, Disney wants it to be perfect, right?" he says. "And our fanbase, they *expect* it to be perfect. We can't have it be sub-par: it's *Kingdom Hearts III*. It just can't be your average well-made game. It has to be more than that." Indeed, this is a collaboration between two dream-weaving titans, two makers of happy childhood memories: doubtless there are plenty of creators at Disney who grew up gazing starry-eyed at the world of *Final Fantasy*, and likewise, Square Enix employees who gazed right back into Disney's animated wonderlands – Nomura himself, so passionate about the world of Toy Story that the idea of making *Kingdom Hearts III* without it was so unimaginable, among them. There is more at stake here than just a good game.

No wonder *Kingdom Hearts III* took so long to create, then. This was an astonishingly complex balancing act which required the developers both to respect the past and to elaborate upon it meaningfully to make something that will resonate years from now. Indeed, Square's next-gen *Kingdom Hearts* – despite its appearance at the tail-end of a console generation – has done more with its ten years than most. It's evolved the way at least one company works in its production, and its impact will almost certainly reverberate throughout Square's future. And its team hope for more besides: for their creation to have the same effect on its players as Toy Story did on Nomura, or Square's games did on Yasue, and to inspire more creators in future. "I guess I wanted to make a game that was really talked about," Yasue says. "We want to sell a lot of games, yes – but at the same time, it should be a game that could be talked about ten years from now." He pauses. "When I came to this company, I was really inspired by *Final Fantasy VII*, and so it would be great if kids play our game, and they come to our interviews, and they join us, right? It had to be something that big. Something with a legacy." ■



"This company, in at least one way, hasn't changed since it was called Squaresoft. We want to make fun stuff; we want to make cool stuff"



THE EDGE AWARDS

After a stellar 2017, this was always set to be a quiet one. Yet that's not necessarily a bad thing. In a year in which few of the industry's typical big hitters made a mark, the work of smaller studios came to the fore. The result was a year full of pleasant, and frequently delightful, surprises.

Who, as the clock struck midnight at the start of 2018, would have predicted that a 3D platformer that wasn't made by Nintendo would be one of the year's best? Or that a bold new take on a decades-old puzzle game would be jostling for top spot? The result is one of the broadest, most esoteric and, yes, most surprising top tens in recent memory.

Yet despite all that, this was also a year that saw the trends of the past few years continue. Japan is back to its best, contributing almost half of this year's top ten. VR is yet to truly dominate, as we were once told it would, but its presence was once again keenly, often brilliantly felt. And what the indie scene lacks in funding and bluster, it more than makes up for in freewheeling creativity and a willingess to bend the rules.

There were stinkers, of course, some more high-profile than others. There was scandal – though let's be honest, we'd be disappointed if there wasn't. There were far too many sequels, and too few of them were good enough. But one truly was, and has left an indelible mark both on the year in games, and the industry itself. Over the pages that follow we celebrate the best, worst and weirdest of another fascinating year.

PLAYSTATION GAME OF THE YEAR







RUNNER-UP

GOD OF WAR

Developer/publisher SIE (Santa Monica Studio)
Format PS4

Kratos's return is a welcome redefinition of gaming's grumpiest antihero as a caring, sharing, monster-tearing dad. Fatherhood suits him, it turns out – he's as capable of tenderness as eye-gouging, gizzard-ripping aggression, and his journey with son Atreus to scatter his wife's ashes is a spectacular and even occasionally touching treat.

RUNNER-UP

ASTRO BOT RESCUE MISSION

Developer Asobi Team, SIE Japan Studio
Publisher SIE **Format** PSVR

In a year we were reminded that Spyro The Dragon – like Crash Bandicoot before him – inexplicably still has legions of fans, Sony produced a 3D platformer with a degree of wit and invention deserving of genuine acclaim, and a mascot worthy of PlayStation. If there's an *Astro Bot* revival in 20 years' time, that's one anniversary we'll happily celebrate.

WINNER

TETRIS EFFECT

Developer Monstars, Resonair **Publisher** Enhance Games
Format PS4, PSVR

Tetsuya Mizuguchi tried, and failed, to secure the *Tetris* licence 15 years ago. Clearly he suspected then what we now know: that Alexey Pajitnov's seminal puzzler is a perfect fit for a Mizuguchi sound and light show. Spectacular yet restrained, heart-pounding yet blissfully relaxing, it's not only the best PS4 game this year, but arguably Miz's best game to date.

XBOX GAME OF THE YEAR







RUNNER-UP

GAME PASS

Developer/publisher Various
Format Xbox One

With the present era of Xbox so creatively moribund, Microsoft has spent 2018 building for the future with some high-profile studio acquisitions, and looked to the past to help plug the chasms in its release schedule. Game Pass is now as central to the Xbox value proposition as a *Halo* or *Gears*. That said, it'd sure be nice to fill this section with three new games next year.

RUNNER-UP

SEA OF THIEVES

Developer Rare **Publisher** Microsoft Studios
Format PC, Xbox One

Rare's pirate adventure might not be to everyone's taste – purposefully gawky and freeform, *Sea Of Thieves* is less about what you do than how you get there. With clever design that keeps interactions with other players wholly unpredictable, Rare's gorgeous, mercurial ocean has given us great anecdotes and a new appreciation for what multiplayer can mean.

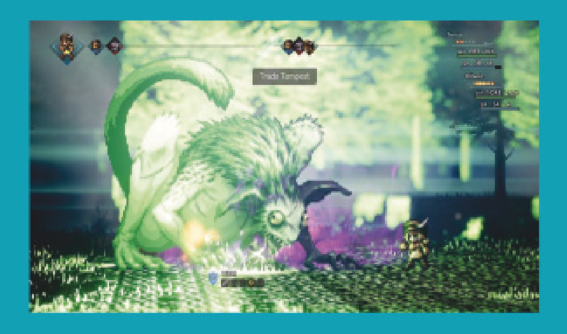
WINNER

FORZA HORIZON 4

Developer Playground Games **Publisher** Microsoft Studios
Format PC, Xbox One

Having tooled around Australia and southern Europe, *Horizon*'s homecoming is the best game Playground has made – until that *Fable* reboot comes along, at least. Changing seasons were the hook, but the real star of the show is a new structure for open-world racing games, with a suite of daily and weekly challenges that reward repeat visits, whatever the time of year.

NINTENDO GAME OF THE YEAR



RUNNER-UP

OCTOPATH TRAVELLER

Developer Acquire, Square Enix **Publisher** Nintendo **Format** Switch

Its eight-stories-in-one conceit didn't always work, but after Square's disastrous *Secret Of Mana* remake, this was nostalgia done right. Borrowing smartly from *Bravely Default*, it treated us to some of the most exhilarating JRPG fights we've had in ages, while Yasunori Nishiki's soundtrack, itself blending old and new, was one of the year's best scores.



RUNNER-UP

SPLATOON 2: OCTO EXPANSION

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EPD) **Format** Switch

Hisashi Nogami and crew went above and beyond with this full-fat add-on, a smart and surprisingly tough-edged expansion comprising a series of challenge maps, each repurposing the game's weapon set to inventive new ends. Its twisted story culminates in a finale that comfortably outstrips the main game's singleplayer campaign. DLC done right.



WINNER

SUPER SMASH BROS ULTIMATE

Developer Sora Ltd, Bandai Namco Studios **Publisher** Nintendo **Format** Switch

The best Nintendo game of the year isn't necessarily the *most* Nintendo game of the year, but *Smash*'s cup runneth over with affection for both its publisher and, indeed, all videogames. It's a giant love-in – comically overstuffed with features, characters and delightfully niche references, this is a party to which Masahiro Sakurai ensures everyone is invited.

PC GAME OF THE YEAR



RUNNER-UP

SUBNAUTICA

Developer/publisher Unknown Worlds Entertainment **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One

How do you stand out in the increasingly crowded survival genre? You dip deep below the surface of the sea of a beguiling alien planet. *Subnautica*'s core concept adds oxygen to the list of needs to be managed, but it's about much more than that; chiefly, the curiosity of what new biome, flora or predator might lie a further fathom down, or another mile across.



RUNNER-UP

PILLARS OF ETERNITY II

Developer Obsidian Entertainment **Publisher** Versus Evil **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One

A rare treat for anyone who thought old-school AD&D-based RPGs went out of PC gaming fashion at the same time as beige cases and CRT screens. *Pillars 2* challenges with its merciless combat and asks you to really engage with its systems instead of just clicking on abilities. And you do, because you're already drawn into its piratical fantasy.



WINNER

RETURN OF THE OBRA DINN

Developer/publisher 3909 LLC **Format** PC

It's ironic that the year's finest PC game should be indebted, at least in visual terms, to the early Macintosh computers. At the same time, *Obra Dinn* is a game made for sitting in front of a monitor, notebook by your side, brow furrowed as you lean into the screen, taking in the fine details of these grisly vignettes – using modern tech for some old-fashioned detective work.

VR GAME OF THE YEAR



RUNNER-UP

PERSISTENCE

Developer/publisher Firesprite
Format PSVR

Few firstperson games in VR have felt as comfortable as this, though *The Persistence* compensates by making you uncomfortable in every other way. It's a horror game that's all the more frightening for immersing you so fully in its procedurally generated world; the sequence where scuttling nasties hunt you in narrow crawlspaces is a bona fide nerve-shredder.



RUNNER-UP

TETRIS EFFECT

Developer Monstars, Resonair **Publisher** Enhance Games
Format PS4, PSVR

The resolution drop may hurt it more than it did *Rez Infinite*, but Enhance's latest VR experiment is about so much more than its presentation. Thanks to its static puzzle playing field, set far back into the display, one VR newcomer in **Edge**'s circle of friends broke their duck with it, and stuck it out for over an hour. This is one of the friendliest VR games you'll ever play.



WINNER

ASTRO BOT RESCUE MISSION

Developer Asobi Team, SIE Japan Studio
Publisher SIE **Format** PSVR

Without VR, *Astro Bot* would be a robust little platformer with some cute creative flourishes. With it, it's a revelation. It consistently finds ways to acknowledge and reward your physical presence within the world, beyond simply giving you a role as a voyeur or chaperone. All that, and you can play for hours without coming close to losing your lunch. A joy.

BEST VISUAL DESIGN

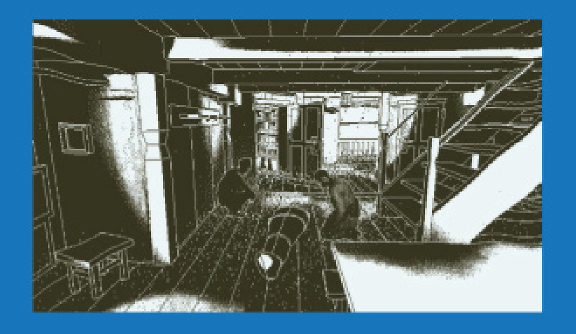


RUNNER-UP

CHUCHEL

Developer/publisher Amanita Design
Format Android, iOS, PC

It's all in the animation, really. Jaromír Plachý distils the essence of Buster Keaton and Pingu into one angry, cherry-coveting scribble, who yells, guffaws and gets stretched, smashed and deformed across 30 comic skits. Amanita's craft can be seen in every frame, precision-tooled for maximum hilarity, while its world's spiky, surreal edges prevent it lapsing into twee whimsy.



RUNNER-UP

RETURN OF THE OBRA DINN

Developer/publisher 3909 LLC **Format** PC

Red Dead might have the edge in fidelity, but Lucas Pope's "insurance adventure" is equally transportive, its images of violent ends at once fascinating, horrifying and oddly moving. The occasional lack of clarity brought about by its striking, singular '1bit' aesthetic only adds to its mysteries, though its details, big and small, are crucial to solving them. Vivid and distinctive.



WINNER

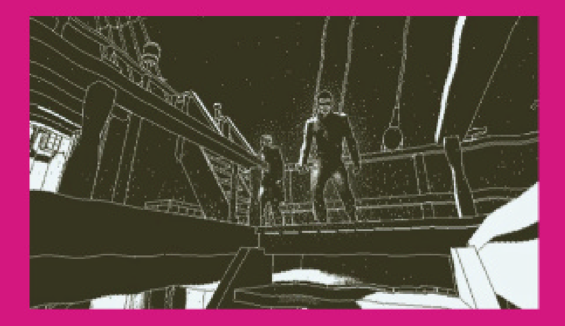
RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2

Developer/publisher Rockstar Games
Format PS4, Xbox One

There's a custom animation for everything, whether you're blowing the head off a rival, stalking an elk through the undergrowth or grabbing a pitchfork to clean up cowpats. And it all takes place in an exquisitely rendered, immaculately lit, vast and staggeringly detailed world. Say what you want about the controls. This is the new best-looking game of all time.

BEST AUDIO DESIGN







RUNNER-UP

RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2

Developer/publisher Rockstar Games **Format** PS4, Xbox One

The lavish attention to detail of Rockstar's astounding world extends to its audio presentation. It's there in the thumping crack of wild-west gunfire, in the delicate scruff of hooves on a dusty plain and in the distant rumble of thunder that signals a coming storm. Above all it's in a note-perfect performance from an enormous, and terrific, ensemble cast.

RUNNER-UP

RETURN OF THE OBRA DINN

Developer/publisher 3909 LLC **Format** PC

Those visuals only give you half the picture – if that. The legwork is really in what comes before: snippets of dialogue, wooden creaks and groans, the boom of a musket, a blood-chilling scream – all ample warning for the gruesome reveal to follow. And the single note that greets a correct deduction is 2018's most satisfying sound.

WINNER

TETRIS EFFECT

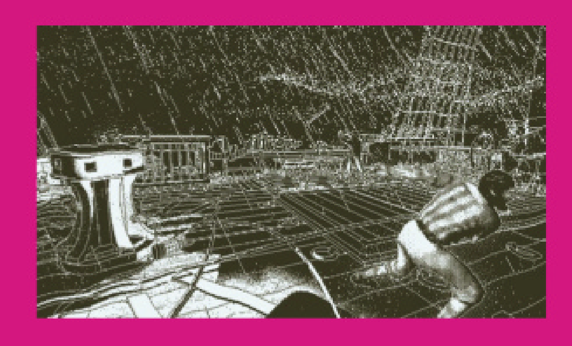
Developer Monstars, Resonair **Publisher** Enhance Games **Format** PS4, PSVR

The music's great, of course, an achingly modern trip across the full spectrum of electronic sound. But it's what you add to it that really counts. Block rotations, movements and drops generate sound effects, as the Mizuguchi house style demands. Yet they have never fit so well as this, making for a game that's as much about the performance as it is the puzzle.

BEST STORYTELLING







RUNNER-UP

THE BANNER SAGA 3

Developer Stoic Studio **Publisher** Versus Evil **Format** PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One

Here's how to make a player's investment in a trilogy pay off: by surprising them with a shift in structure, by staying true to your own storytelling principles and by doing all that while rewarding three games' worth of choices in ways that tell them their choices mattered – while reminding them that fate always holds the upper hand. Are you watching, BioWare?

RUNNER-UP

RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2

Developer/publisher Rockstar Games **Format** PS4, Xbox One

Like its predecessor, *RDR2* shows how well Rockstar can write characters when it's not shoehorning *GTA*-style cultural satire into every line of dialogue. The supporting cast are wonderful, but in Arthur Morgan it has found its finest protagonist to date, a character coming to terms with the sad, slow end of his way of life, and ultimately of life itself.

WINNER

RETURN OF THE OBRA DINN

Developer/publisher 3909 LLC **Format** PC

Interactive storytelling boils down to an unspoken contract between developer and player that's inevitably broken by one or both parties. *Obra Dinn* takes a different tack: the story is already over, but only you can ensure it lives on. You're a late observer to the telling and responsible for the retelling, filling in the gaps via a time-manipulating pocket watch. ▸

HARDWARE



RUNNER-UP

NINTENDO LABO

Manufacturer Nintendo

Sixty quid for cardboard? Nintendo made it feel like a bargain. The software might be hit and miss (though the Variety Kit's fishing game is a minor classic) but assembling these contraptions has the same satisfaction as a complex Lego build. It's a reminder that games aren't just art, but pieces of complex engineering – and Labo's educational bent makes it manna for STEM teachers, too.



RUNNER-UP

XBOX ADAPTIVE CONTROLLER

Manufacturer Microsoft

It looks *cool*. And it didn't have to – Microsoft's latest bit of kit is all about functionality, a fully customisable controller designed to help disabled videogame fans comfortably play with ease. Even the futuristic packaging it comes in is accessible. Microsoft may have lagged behind this year when it came to games, but the Adaptive Controller proved it was way ahead of the curve in another respect.



WINNER

PSVR

Manufacturer Sony

Sony's strategy for PSVR – once again it has clustered all the year's notable releases together in its final few months – may make sense for the PlayStation platform as a whole, but developers may not put up with being forced to fight over the same lunch for long. Still, with *Astro Bot*, *Tetris Effect* and *The Persistence*, to name a few, this was the year PSVR came into its own. What once felt like a curio is now essential.

LIVING GAME



RUNNER-UP

OVERWATCH

Developer/publisher Blizzard Entertainment
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2016

Two years on, and the unconventional team shooter is going from strength to strength. New heroes have balanced and progressed the meta, and shown that Blizzard is far from out of ideas (a hamster in a weaponised mecha-ball, anyone?). Meanwhile, the esports scene is thriving. As far as phenomena go, this one is giving *World Of Warcraft* a run for its money.



RUNNER-UP

DESTINY 2

Developer Bungie **Publisher** Activision
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2017

Forsaken puts *Destiny* in its best ever shape. It is now packed with things to do, that are worth doing for more than the dangling carrot of a Legendary reward. Yet *Destiny 2*'s turnaround is about more than one release: Bungie has changed its ways, too. It's now more open in its communication and frequent in its new content releases, and its game is all the better for it.



WINNER

FORTNITE

Developer/publisher Epic Games **Format** Android, iOS, PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One **Release** 2017

What a difference a year makes. *Fortnite*'s PvE component launched into early access in July 2017 with barely a whimper. Fast forward 12 months and it is a true pop-culture phenomenon, the stuff of tabloid scare stories, its emotes referenced in goal celebrations at the World Cup Final. *PUBG* felt like lightning in a bottle; *Fortnite* is something else entirely.

PUBLISHER OF THE YEAR



RUNNER-UP

ENHANCE GAMES

Tetsuya Mizuguchi's publishing label has hit on a winning formula of nostalgic futurism, giving old favourites a new lease of life on modern technology. *Lumines Remastered* played it safe – though as a handheld game at heart, it's an immaculate fit for Switch – but *Tetris Effect* was one of the games of the year, and certainly its most pleasant surprise, whether played in virtual reality or on a big 4K screen.



RUNNER-UP

NINTENDO

With *Zelda*, *Mario*, *Mario Kart* and *Splatoon* all launching in Switch's first year, this always looked like a quiet one for Nintendo. Yet it has ended it strongly with *Pokémon* and *Smash Bros*, and smartly padded out the release calendar with ports of overlooked Wii U games that Switch owners might have missed. And with Labo, it has swerved into unexpected territory in a way only Nintendo can.



WINNER

SIE

In a quiet year for the platform holders, and with the publishing community clearly starting to think about the next generation, this was something of an open goal for Sony. There were mis-steps – surely it has finally lost patience with David Cage – but *Spider-Man*, *God Of War* and its best-ever PSVR line-up meant this was a year to remember, even if 2019's looking a bit barren.

STUDIO OF THE YEAR



RUNNER-UP

SIE JAPAN STUDIO

While we've heard rumblings of discontent about the PlayStation operation's Tokyo studio, there was no arguing with its output in 2018. In addition to running support on Bluepoint's astounding *Shadow Of The Colossus* remake and Hidetaka Miyazaki's VR debut *Déraciné*, it gave PlayStation VR one of its best games to date with the stellar and smartly designed *Astro Bot Rescue Mission*.



RUNNER-UP

ROCKSTAR

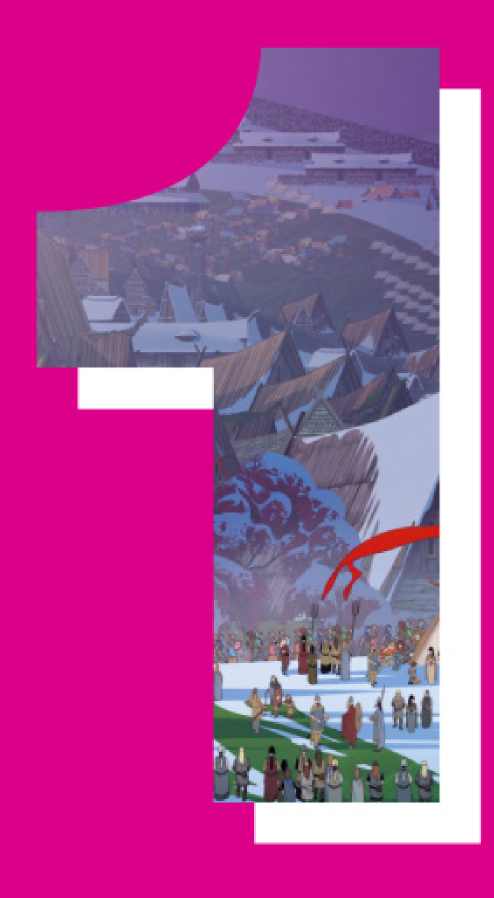
Rockstar's global eight-studio network may have turned out the runaway game of the year, but reports that emerged on the eve of *RDR2*'s release raised concerns about the human cost of such a staggering technical achievement. It's a sour note in what should be a year to celebrate, but unlikely to be repeated: if we've learned one thing about Rockstar over the years, it's that it doesn't like to be embarrassed.



WINNER

EPIC GAMES

You'd hardly have noticed Epic was even at E3 2017: locked away in an upstairs meeting room, it was the forgotten man of the industry. Now it runs the world's biggest game, and the lessons learned in its upkeep have seen Unreal Engine come on leaps and bounds. *Fortnite*'s success broke down walls between platform holders, and Epic is giving its crossplay tech to other devs for free. A remarkable turnaround.




THE BANNER SAGA 3

Developer Stoic **Publisher** Versus Evil **Format** PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One

Stoic's trilogy-closer makes a bold choice right at the beginning: to tell the story it needs to rather than the one you might prefer it did. Your long, arduous journey came to a natural terminus at the end of the second chapter. Now, for half the finale, you're stuck in a city where it's unclear which will collapse first – the surrounding walls, or the uneasy truce between the factions within them.

It's the end of the world, and here we are, for once not arriving after the dust has settled but while it's still being kicked up. The stakes are ever more desperate, each choice seemingly resulting in a loss of some kind. Meanwhile, out on the battlefield, new wave-based skirmishes support the theme of struggling on with what little you have left: you can have wounded units wearily limping into a second fight, or thrust greenhorns into the fray, hoping their good health will be enough to compensate for their lack of battle experience.

The secret of *The Banner Saga 3*'s success – and, for that matter, the two previous instalments – is that there's always a glimmer of humanity. Kindness doesn't always pay off, but you'll see hope in the way different races pull together, even as opportunists like the brilliantly loathsome Rugga create deeper rifts in an already splintered world.

It's not an easy ride by any means, frequently pitting your gut instincts against your knowledge of, and affection for, these characters. One particularly cruel moment saw us choose to trust one character whose judgement had never before been called into question, only to see them cut down because they, too, picked heart over head. But it's a game that respects and rewards both your emotional involvement and your tactical smarts to the bitter end. As the closing scenes play out, you realise just how much that matters.





PILLARS OF ETERNITY II: DEADFIRE

Developer Obsidian Entertainment **Publisher** Versus Evil **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One

For Obsidian to successfully capture and reproduce the spirit of the Infinity Engine RPGs, it had to look forward as well as back. *Baldur's Gate*, *Planescape: Torment* and *Icewind Dale* didn't thrill because of their trademark isometric perspective or AD&D rulesets, but because they offered a new depth of world-building and roleplaying. *Baldur's Gate* began a five-year run of releases from Black Isle and BioWare that changed what we expected from the genre. No longer simply clicking the left mouse button on Kobolds, RPGs were the preferred vehicle for experimental storytelling and characterisation.

Pillars Of Eternity II's mandate was next to impossible, then: conjure a familiar atmosphere, while innovating. And it fulfilled that mandate. The most surprising touch is the vein of *Sid Meier's Pirates* that runs through it, and indeed how natural it feels to command a ship in naval warfare and manage rations for your crew in a fantasy RPG. The first *Pillars* played it safe with a Euro-fantasy setting that would have been indistinguishable from *Ultima* or *Might & Magic* were it not for the presence of its arrogant gods, clinging to power however they could. The sequel takes a risk in transporting players who were expecting *Baldur's Gate IV* to a tropical archipelago, and ultimately it's the depth of writing that silences any dissenters. The political skullduggery between the Valian Trading Company, Principi, native tribes and mercenaries all scrabbling for valuable Adra feels more characteristic of a great Infinity Engine RPG than leafy meadows.

In the far reaches of its archipelago, wonderful sidequests await. Like Nemnok the Devourer, in which an Imp wielding a magical amulet poses as a god and demands human sacrifices. Or the island full of zombies who don't know they're dead. In every corner, *Pillars II* delights and surprises.





SUPER SMASH BROS ULTIMATE

Developer Sora Ltd, Bandai Namco Studios **Publisher** Nintendo **Format** Switch

There are some who would argue that *Ultimate* warrants a place in any end-of-year list, if only for its sheer volume of modes, features, fighters and options – take your pick, you'll struggle to find any area where it's lacking. One of the reasons *Smash* makes our top ten is not that it's busting at the seams, but because it feels like everything Masahiro Sakurai and team have somehow crammed into a tiny Switch cartridge has been lavished with the same amount of care.

It works only because there's been enough attention invested in a battle against a character pretending to be someone else from an obscure Japanese-only adventure game as in ensuring Simon Belmont walks like he does in the *Castlevania* games. Or, for that matter, in the way Ryu and Ken can, uniquely among *Smash* characters, recreate their signature moves with *Street Fighter*'s quarter- and half-circle inputs – and this way, the hadoken is more powerful than if you simply release it as a neutral special. Or even that it features a unique (albeit short) campaign for all of the 70-plus fighters. If you've ever wondered how *Duck Hunt*'s dog-and-mallard double-act might fare against *Monster Hunter*'s fireball-spitting, spiky Rathalos – hey, we're not judging – then Classic mode's the place to go.

But the new Spirits mode is the real headline here, giving solo players the long-term hook *Smash* has lacked in the past, while effectively acting as a training camp for multiplayer, as it pits you against dozens of opponents, each with special abilities or stage hazards to overcome. You can, of course, turn all of that off elsewhere, playing simplified versions of each stage with no items. Though while vanilla *Smash* has its fans, for our money this beautifully bewildering fighting game still works best as a knockabout dust-up between friends, kitchen sink and all.





MONSTER HUNTER: WORLD

Developer/publisher Capcom **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One

A lot of *Monster Hunter* fans were nervous about *World*, fearing that Capcom's desire to have the series appeal to a wider audience would lead to a severe dumbing down of it; that, with all its rough edges sanded off, it would no longer be the same game. They needn't have worried. At its core, *Monster Hunter: World* is still *Monster Hunter* – and the work that has been done on the structure that underpins it has resulted not just in a more accessible game, but a much better one, too.

The community's chief concern was the new scoutflies, the luminous green swarm of glowing breadcrumbs that alert you to points or items of interest and, once you've picked up a monster's scent, will follow its trail meticulously. Yet far from simplifying the fight, scoutflies are a revelation, allowing Capcom's level designers to flex their muscles in ways the series has never seen before, and letting fights with the game's wondrously animated bestiary span the entirety of these beguiling environments. There's a real sense of drama to the hunts, climaxing in a brief moment of regret as you chase down a limping, desperate monster and put it down for its final nap. Then you load back to the start, and set off after the scoutflies once again. Those new trousers aren't going to craft themselves, you know.

The result is a game which proves that streamlining something doesn't necessarily mean making it smaller – just reshaping it in order to improve it. It has not entirely shed the arcane systems of *Monster Hunter*s past: we still have nightmares about how the game administers the theoretically simple act of partnering up with three pals on a quest. But once you get out there there's nothing else quite like it. *Monster Hunter*'s magic has always been there, certainly. But it has never been easier to find, or fall head over heels in love with.





HOLLOW KNIGHT

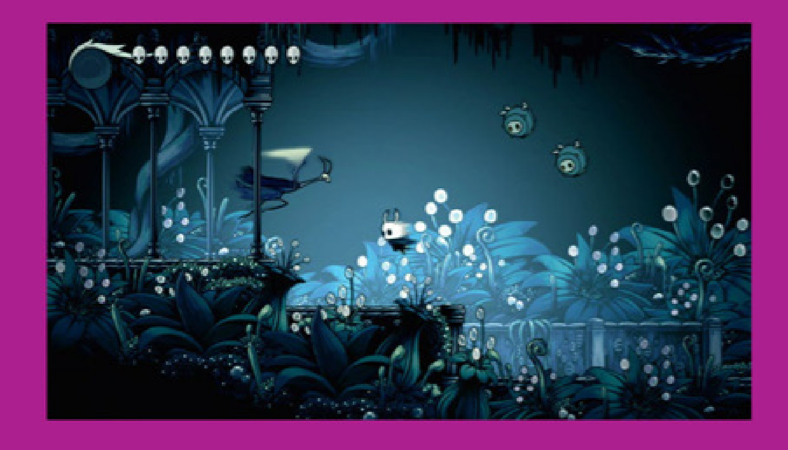
Developer/publisher Team Cherry **Format** PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One

Okay, technically, this tremendous Metroidvania was released last year. But it wasn't on Switch – that portable portal to worlds overlooked – and it was swallowed in a sea of Steam releases. *Hollow Knight* has a subtle glow, best appreciated when given time and space to breathe.

Indeed, the first hours of the game are frankly underwhelming. A tiny, moon-masked bug with nothing but a nail for a weapon, you scurry through the dismal Forgotten Crossroads with not so much as a dash to keep you company. In fact, it's not even the first ability you receive. *Hollow Knight* is the master of delayed gratification: whenever you finally *do* find an ability – squirrelled away at the end of a treacherous platforming section or behind a vicious boss – you've clearly been missing, it's like finally being able to exhale.

And then, curiosity flourishes. The subterranean world of Hallownest is a glorious piece of design: while your first instinct on entering each new area will be to seek a map to fill out, it's testament to Team Cherry's command of atmosphere and pacing that you'll often resist the urge. With a few superpowers under your belt, there's much to be gained from creeping around in the dark. There is something in every corner: an odd architectural structure, a faintly terrifying new friend, a strange clue as to how this place came to exist. With every new landmark, the world becomes more real, the maps more internal.

The overall effect – despite punishing difficulty spikes and the horrifying Deepnest – is undeniably inviting. The more you come to trust in your own ability, and Hallownest's knack of delivering you exactly where you need to be, the more of a delight *Hollow Knight* is. Hardly surprising, then, that it would eventually turn up in our hands in some form or other: this is a world well-versed in the art of waiting to be found.





ASTRO BOT RESCUE MISSION

Developer Asobi Team, SIE Japan Studio **Publisher** SIE **Format** PSVR

There is nothing truly relevatory about *Astro Bot*. Rather, its magic comes from the obviousness of everything it does – or rather, how obvious its many tricks seem as soon as they've been and gone. This is a parade of ideas that each make natural, but no less brilliant, use of PSVR's feature set.

How appropriate that it should be a 3D platformer to be the first game to make such effortless use of everything PSVR has to offer. It might not match *Super Mario 64* – few things can – but like its spiritual forebear, it provides a perfect entry point to a bold new piece of technology. To play it is to briefly forget the struggles the VR community has had with camera movement, locomotion, comfort and all the rest of it. It just *works*.

And frequently, it sings. While it is notionally about the titular robot that scurries about the place in search of his lost crewmates and the components of their destroyed spacecraft, the real star of the show is the player. Cast as a large helper robot – seen in reflections or monitor screens – you are in equal parts travel guide, support act and cameraman. The latter is the game's greatest trick, and solves one of its genre's longest-standing problems: perspective. If you're struggling to line up a comfortable angle, just move your head. You'll do likewise to smash through scenery, play headers-and-volleys with an enemy, or indulge a robo-sunflower in an impromptu dance-off.

There may have been better 3D platformers down the years, but none has been so immersive. When a rising water level reaches your chin, you'll instinctively take a big gulp of air; when some critter flings itself at you, you'll flinch, then shake your head furiously to dislodge it. When something smiles or waves at you, you'll do the same back – but in fairness, chances are you'll already be smiling anyway. A charming little triumph.





INTO THE BREACH

Developer/publisher Subset Games **Format** PC, Switch

When you boil them down, turn-based tactics games are just series of dynamic puzzles. Can you hack that workstation this turn? Can you prevent Donnel from being killed and take out that enemy mage? But there's no tactics game that expresses this idea more vividly than *Into The Breach*. Its large-scale battles between giant insects and towering mechs take place on intimate eight-by-eight tiled boards and across just five turns. Your job is to stop the insects, the Vek, from destroying your cities, but you're pitilessly outnumbered. Your three mechs will face swarms of acid-spitting, web-slinging, spider-birthing bugs, and any one of them is capable of demolishing a city in a single blow.

If you've played Subset's previous game, *FTL*, the ever-yawning pressure will feel familiar. But *Into The Breach* adds a wrinkle: you'll be shown exactly what the bugs will do on their next turn, and in what order. Your turn, then, is all about disrupting their plans, turning their attacks against each other and deflecting their strikes against what's most important. Mechs specialise in different ways of fighting the Vek – shifting them, dealing damage, shielding targets, moving position – and over the course of a campaign you'll steadily outfit new weapons and increasingly skilled pilots, honing a toolkit good enough to face the final battle.

You'll spend tens of minutes per turn figuring out how to save a city while keeping your mechs out of danger, preventing more Vek from arriving, blowing a dam, pushing a Vek into the path of a falling meteorite. There's always a way to mitigate the worst, and there are few more satisfying moments than when you discover a way to do better. Through intricate sets of abilities and by giving you prescience, *Into The Breach* procedurally generates some of the best puzzles in all games.





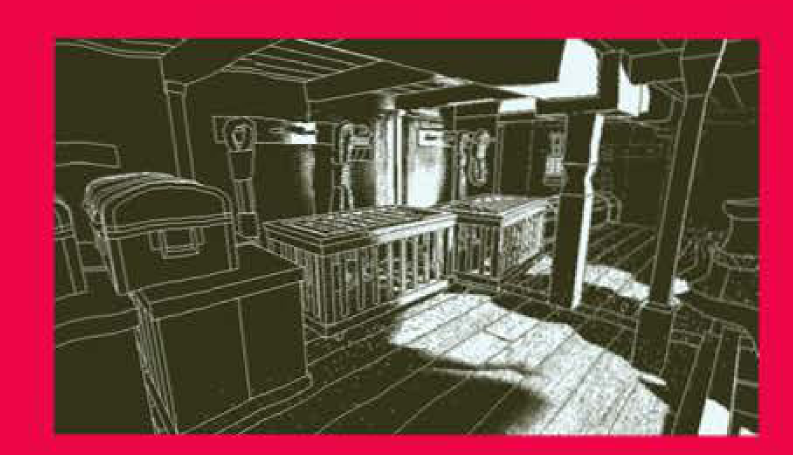
RETURN OF THE OBRA DINN

Developer/publisher 3909 LLC **Format** PC

It might have won several individual awards, but *Obra Dinn* wouldn't be in the upper reaches of this list if all those parts didn't serve the whole quite so well. No game in 2019 looked or sounded like this, but more importantly, nothing this year – or, for that matter, any previous year – played quite like it. For once, a detective game demands some proper investigative work, rather than spoon-feeding solutions to you as soon as you pick up vital evidence. And yet all of its conceptual cleverness is facilitated by a contrivance that's pure videogame: a pocket watch that can rewind time. Lucas Pope doesn't try to explain it, and he's right not to. It's simply a device you need for the game to work, and so you quickly accept it as part of the fiction.

So no, it doesn't add up that sound travels slower than light, even when travelling backwards. But separating audio and video allows Pope to spring several surprises upon the player. The first one comes after you've solved the cause of death for the first three corpses, as you discover that this is more than just a standard mutiny – and something way beyond our earthly ken. The next comes when you eventually head below deck, and there are plenty more shocks to come thereafter. Other games may have moved us more this year than *Return Of The Obra Dinn*, but none has caused so many sharp intakes of breath.

In playing with the chronology of events, Pope can control the pace of revelations, ensuring that even as you're flitting between decks and the bodies are piling up, all the major drama doesn't happen at once, nor do you face a long wait for ship to go down. Beneath that attractive surface, you can almost hear its interlocking cogs ticking and whirring with quiet precision – much like a pocket watch, you might say.





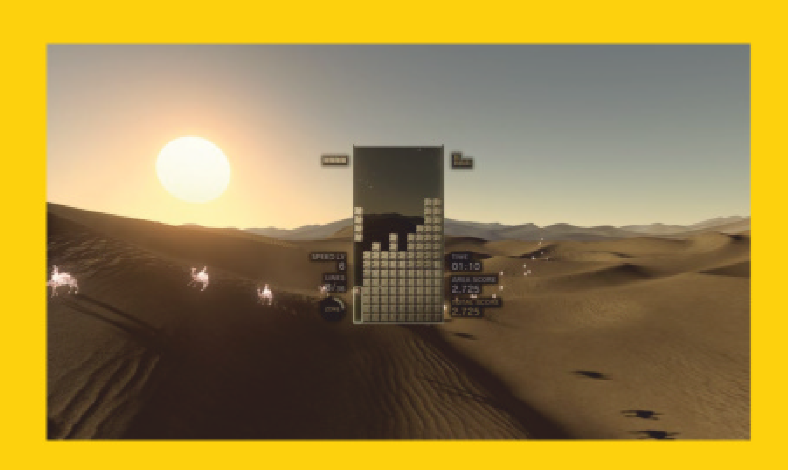
TETRIS EFFECT

Developer Monstars, Resonair **Publisher** Enhance Games **Format** PS4, PSVR

If videogames are, in some way, reflections of the world we live in, then turn the page and you'll see one that takes a more realistic – to a fault, some would say – standpoint. By contrast, *Tetris Effect* is a wide-eyed idealist at heart. Its signature mode, Journey, takes in a range of sights, sounds and experiences, from humans to animals, cities to forests, mountains to oceans, land to space. It casts us as pioneers, on an expedition to discover what binds us.

Goodness, how pretentious it sounds. This is *Tetris* we're talking about, right? Yes, and in some ways the brilliant puzzle game at its heart is arguably the least interesting thing about it. Or it would be, were it not for Tetsuya Mizuguchi applying his trademark synaesthetic spin. *Tetris Effect* rolls play and performance into one. Spin a Tetrimino and you're sounding out a percussive rhythm, sending messages from ground control to a NASA satellite and back, or tinkling the ivories along to a jazz drummer's hi-hat fills. And when the pieces start to pile up, you can zone out, a squeeze of the trigger slowing things down as you stack up as many lines as you can before demolishing the lot as the beat drops in once more. It represents opportunity for score-chasers and respite for panicked mistake-makers: another inspired piece of design.

Sure, the Effect modes can't quite compete with the brilliance of that musical Journey: it's still *Tetris*, but it's no longer transcendent. Yet even here there's a sense of togetherness, from the weekly rituals where all players contribute to a set target, to the avatars – from aliens to manta rays, Tetriminos to pterodactyls – floating above the Earth like neon angels. As the song on the opening stage reminds us, we're all connected; the miracle of *Tetris Effect* is that it makes you feel it.





RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2

Developer/publisher Rockstar Games **Format** PS4, Xbox One

It's okay if you don't like it. We can even understand why. *Red Dead Redemption 2* has UX problems up the wazoo. There are moments when the systems that bubble around beneath the game's crust collide in unexpected, or annoying, or outright ruinous ways. It was eight years in the making, at eight studios around the world, and the implicit awkwardness of that arrangement often shows.

And yet. *Yet*. There is untold magic in them thar hills: in those frozen mountainsides, those arid plains, those fetid, foggy swamps and everywhere in between. This open world is unmatched in its scale and splendour. The remarkable fidelity of its flora and fauna, the drama of its dynamic weather, its peerless dynamic score and the systems that support them all – this is a videogame world for the ages, and a new industry benchmark.

It is also home to Rockstar's best story, feeling at once like a sequel and a prequel, vividly performed by the finest ensemble cast the studio has assembled. Arthur Morgan is a man of reasonable intentions who accepts the likely consequences of the life he has chosen. Yet this time it is not his past that catches up with him. After six long chapters, largely spent running away from trouble, he is ultimately brought down by the one thing from which none of us is able to run.

The epilogue wonderfully sets the scene for John Marston's original adventure, but there's magic in the post-game too. We have come to appreciate how hands-off the game is with so many of its systems: you don't need to hunt, or craft, or help people, but doing so deepens your connection with the world, and nets you a significant, but non-essential reward for your trouble. It's a rare open-world game indeed that's happy to let you ignore so much of it – as well as one that, for all its little flaws, is nonetheless utterly essential.



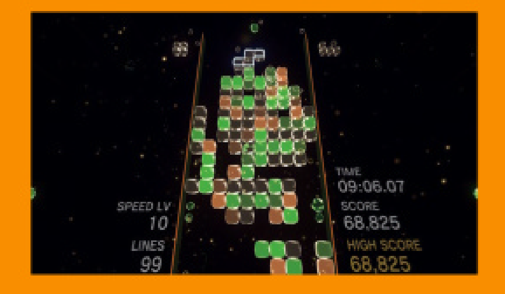
THE ALTERNATIVE EDGE AWARDS

MOST AWKWARD SENSATION

TETRIS EFFECT

Developer Monstars, Resonair
Publisher Enhance Games **Format** PS4, PSVR

Tetsuya Mizuguchi's musical puzzler excels at evoking odd feelings in the player. A stressful game should not be so chilled out, surely, while something so mundane as *Tetris* should not leave you feeling better about the world outside. Yet things take a turn when you realise that spare controllers can be used as rumble peripherals and placed anywhere on your body. Is it just us, or did it get hot in here all of a sudden?



FONDEST FAREWELL

RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2

Developer/publisher Rockstar Games
Format PS4, Xbox One

If you've yet to see Arthur Morgan's adventure to its conclusion, look away now. If you have, you'll know all about the fatal fall in the final mission, where Morgan stops running from the law for long enough to thank his steed for its service. Replay the mission through the menus and it won't be repeated, since you're using a different, nameless horse. We still miss you, Mr Snaffles.



CLUMSIEST WOKENESS

DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN

Developer Quantic Dream **Publisher** SIE
Format PS4

Marks for effort, we suppose, but David Cage's attempts to tether his sci-fi drama to America's civil rights movement led to scenes that, had we not been holding a controller, we'd have been watching through our fingers. With robots in segregated compartments at the back of buses, and "We have a dream" graffiti tags, it's a reminder that 'subtlety' is not a word in Quantic Dream's vocabulary.



LEAST WELCOME REMASTER

MARVEL'S SPIDER-MAN

Developer Insomniac Games **Publisher** SIE
Format PS4

Insomniac's effort to represent all sides of Peter Parker's personality was a noble one. He's not just a web-slinging superhero, after all: he's a hormonal kid, a doting nephew and a budding scientist. Yet there must surely have been a better way to express the latter in a videogame than by forcing the player through dozens of *Pipe-Mania* puzzles. Some games are history for a reason.

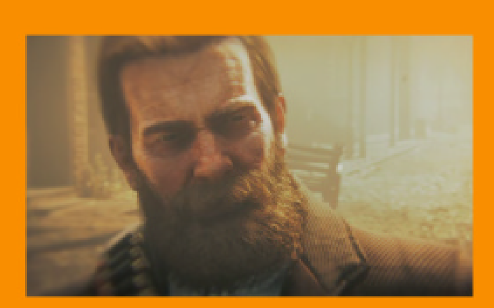


BEARD OF THE YEAR

RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2

Developer/publisher Rockstar Games
Format PS4, Xbox One

Rockstar showed that growing facial hair is not just about forgetting to shave for a bit then waking up one day to find you're in ZZ Top. A beard must be maintained, tended, even coaxed into growing beyond a certain point. Just like the real thing, but with none of the itchiness, people thinking you're homeless, or loved ones complaining about the trimmed hairs left in the sink.



MOST HONEST TITLE

STATE OF DECAY 2

Developer Undead Labs **Publisher** Microsoft Studios
Format PC, Xbox One

With sudden freezes, teleporting NPCs and cadavers dropping out of the sky, here was a game that seemed to be steadily decomposing even as we were playing it. It says much for the troubles Microsoft has had that Undead Labs' slipshod sequel was somehow in contention for our Xbox top three. Hopefully now it's bought the studio it can invest in more stringent QA.



THE PETER MOLYNEUX AWARD

TODD HOWARD

The Tom Cruise of game development – short, ageless, does his own stunts – has been getting away with this stuff for years, but his introduction to *Fallout 76*, on stage at Bethesda's E3 presser, showed once again how meaningless PR bluster can be. *Fallout 76* is indeed four times bigger than *Fallout 4*, but it is also four times quieter, four times buggier, and four times as forgettable. Howard's reputation may not be in tatters, but it's certainly been tarnished.



LEAST AGENCY

FAR CRY 5

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Montreal)
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One

The inherent appeal of open-world games is being able to go wherever you want, and do whatever you like on the way. You'd expect Ubisoft, maker of approximately 862 open-world games in 2018, to know this. We will remember *Far Cry 5* not for its sandbox, but the number of times a tranquiliser dart or hallucination yanked away control and spirited us away to another clumsily written set-piece.



THE LONELY HEART AWARD

LASER LEAGUE

Developer Roll7 **Publisher** 505 Games
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One

Roll7's thrillingly tense, precise future sport felt like a modern classic when we reviewed it. Indeed, *Laser League* probably would have made our top 10 of the year but for the heartbreaking fact that, well, no one's actually playing it. Its bots are no substitute for human opponents – or, for that matter, teammates – but with an eerie silence reverberating around its servers, they're forced to fill in. What a shame.



BEST WIG

ASTRO BOT: RESCUE MISSION

Developer Asobi Team, SIE Japan Studio
Publisher SIE **Format** PSVR

In a game full of delightful little embellishments that would only be possible in VR, there's arguably none finer than the moment you emerge from a short swim to find your peripheral vision obscured by strange, green tendrils. Glancing right, you see a reflection of your robot self, sporting a rather fetching seaweed hairpiece. We'd forgotten what it's like to have such long, flowing locks.



MOST ABSENT REVIEW

THE QUIET MAN

Developer Human Head Studios, Square Enix
Publisher Square Enix **Format** PC, PS4

Release day arrives, and we dispatch an inquisitive email as to the whereabouts of Human Head's new, deeply weird game, a soundless adventure starring a deaf protagonist. Review code has been delayed, we're told. Weeks later, we're still F5-ing our inboxes in anticipation of a long-overdue look at this astonishingly botched blend of The Room-level FMV and *The Bouncer*-level brawling. God knows we're not paying for it.

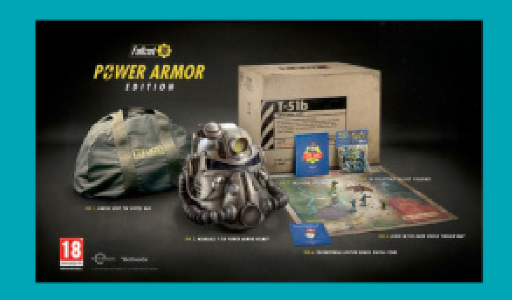


LEAST SPECIAL EDITION

FALLOUT 76

Developer Bethesda Game Studios
Publisher Bethesda Softworks
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One

The line about a fool and his money comes to mind whenever we see details of a tat-filled special edition, but at least publishers normally deliver the goods. The farrago over Bethesda's promised canvas bag that turned out to be nylon – an error atoned for first through a virtual-currency pittance then, after an outcry, an actual canvas bag – was a perfect metaphor for *Fallout 76* itself.



THE MAKING OF...



SKULLGIRLS

How childhood dreams became reality, with a few nightmares along the way

By Nathan Brown

Format 360, Android, Arcade, iOS, PC, PS3, PS4, Switch, Vita, Xbox One
Publisher Autumn Games, Konami, Marvelous
Developer Lab Zero Games, Reverge Labs
Origin US
Release 2012

This is not a typical story. *Skullgirls* is, in itself, no ordinary game: it's a fighting game made by a team that had never made a fighting game before, that began life as a student coder's homebrew experiment and, 13 years later, would launch and sell two million copies. Yet it's also a story of what happens when just about everything that could possibly go wrong goes wrong, and how a team keeps going when the universe seems to be telling them to pack it all in. It is often said that game development is a miracle. Much of the story of *Skullgirls* sounds like outright fantasy.

It begins in 1999. **Mike Zaimont** had loved fighting games since he was a kid – at 15, he bought a *Killer Instinct* cabinet from his local arcade when it closed down, a friend on the high-school wrestling team lugging it upstairs – and always wanted to make one of his own. He spent $300 on a rare broadband adaptor so he could use a homebrew bootloader to run code on his Dreamcast. A fighting-game engine began to take shape but, without an artist, he could only go so far. He graduated from college and joined Pandemic Studios, working on *Star Wars Battlefront* and its sequel.

He was soon introduced, by one of his *Guilty Gear* sparring partners, to Alex Ahad, an illustrator working at anime-themed social network *Gaia Online*. As luck would have it, Ahad had been working on a cast of characters for a fighting game since high school. "He'd already worked with several programmers, and there were two or three versions of an engine, and I didn't want to intrude on that at all," Zaimont recalls. Instead, he wrote to Ahad and asked if he could use his characters to help him develop his engine without worrying about being sued. Ahad agreed, sending over artwork for one of his game's characters, Filia. By way of thanks, Zaimont sent back a build of his engine with Filia playable. Ahad got back in touch, suggesting they work together.

They did, but only in their spare time at first. "I couldn't bring myself to quit Pandemic," Zaimont says. "Giving up security is really hard." Before long EA made his decision for him, shuttering Pandemic, and he began working on *Skullgirls* full time, living off his savings. Ahad soon quit his job at Gaia, and things started moving more quickly. Their first job was to essentially remake the game in HD: the technology was all the rage by now, but it hadn't even existed when Zaimont started tooling around on the Dreamcast and Ahad began doodling fighting-game characters on his sketchpad. Eventually, there was a prototype – something the pair could pitch to publishers in the hope of getting the game made.



While the game can be played 1v1, *Skullgirls* shines as a three-a-side team fighter in the vein of *Marvel Vs Capcom 2*

Their early meetings were chastening. "Several companies asked us questions we were completely unprepared to answer, and which we didn't agree with being asked," Zaimont tells us.

"THE PEOPLE WE WERE PITCHING TO WERE NOT ALWAYS PEOPLE WHO KNEW OR CARED ABOUT VIDEOGAMES"

"A bunch asked us, 'What's the game's target demographic?' It was like, 'I dunno, people that like the game?' We had one company ask why everyone was the same height. We were like, 'They're… not?' It became very clear during that process that the people we were pitching to were not always people who knew about, who played, or even who cared about videogames. It made a large impact on us in terms of choosing who we wanted to work with."

One company Zaimont and Ahad *did* want to work with was Reverge Labs, a new Los Angeles studio set up by one of Zaimont's old Pandemic colleagues, Richard Wyckoff. Reverge set up some more productive meetings with prospective partners, one of which was Autumn Games, the New York-based publisher of hip-hop karaoke game *Def Jam Rapstar*. Three people came to the meeting; Zaimont was showing the game to one of them while the other two chatted business across the room. Zaimont taught his unskilled charge to do a dragon punch motion, then to do it again with two attack buttons instead, to perform Filia's spectacular Fenrir Drive super move. "He did that, and, like, yelped," Zaimont recalls. "The other two people came over and said, 'Do it again'. It took him a while, but he got it, and they turned to us and said, 'Okay, we'd like to talk to you about this'." That meeting taught Zaimont a valuable lesson about the importance of making prototypes. "You never know what's going to catch someone's fancy. But if you don't have it to show them, you'll never find out."

Autumn gave the team enough funding to get set up – and, crucially, a means to get *Skullgirls* onto Xbox 360. While Reverge could publish *Skullgirls* on PS3 and Steam by itself, Microsoft's publishing terms in the 360 era were infamously restrictive: you could only publish a game for the console if you'd previously published another one, or else signed the rights away to Microsoft itself. Thanks to *Def Jam Rapstar*, Autumn had a business arrangement with Konami. The deal was extended to include *Skullgirls*, with Konami publishing it on Xbox 360 and PS3. With the business stuff out of the way, or so they thought, the team got to work. *Skullgirls* was happening.

Zaimont embarked on the project with some lofty goals, the naïvete of a first-timer leading him to seek to fix a lot of problems that have dogged fighting games for years. *Skullgirls* had an automated system that detected infinite combos and shut them down, a ceasefire in the arms race between the players that break games and the developers that have to fix them. He did likewise for unblockable attacks, and devised a novel system to prevent players jumping when performing 360-degree motions for certain special moves (though he would later realise Neo-Geo fighting game *Breakers Revenge* did it first). Yet Zaimont didn't set out to fix all fighting games – just one of them.

"The original goal was: 'Fix *Marvel 2*'," he laughs, referring to *Marvel Vs Capcom 2: New Age Of Heroes*, the three-on-three Capcom crossover game that launched in 2000 and was a tournament fixture for well over a decade. "It's still one of my favourite games, but there were a lot of problems with it. Picking your characters took forever, and in the home version, if you wanted a rematch, everybody had to pick their teams again. There was gameplay stuff,

like being hit by infinites. And there was the relative balance of the characters. There was enough of a top tier for the game to be really fun at a high level, but there were 50 other characters you couldn't use. The main design goal was for *Skullgirls* to be that level of interesting – where you can just go into training mode and emerge nine hours later wondering where the time went, or play 100 games with a person and not even notice – but not have any of the problems that were the reason why a lot of people quit."

Zaimont came from the competitive fighting-game scene, and knew that to be a good player you had to know how games work. He took *Skullgirls* to every tournament he could, showing it to players and asking for feedback. One day he received an email from 'Ya Boi Dekillsage', profanely complaining that he'd been robbed of an important win by an animation bug. Zaimont had never heard of the kid, but went looking for the bug, found it and squished it. Dekillsage turned out to be one of the best *Skullgirls* players in the world, winning the Evo tournament in 2014.

"That letter was instrumental in how I approached community from then on. I realised you can't ignore anybody," Zaimont says. "I would get tons of emails and messages from people and I would read them all and respond to them all, no matter how dumb they sounded. People would ask me, 'Why do you do this?' Well, for every hundred that are terrible, there's one that has good ideas in it." One of *Skullgirls*' greatest gifts to the tournament scene was making it so you had to hold the Start button to pause the game, rather than just tap it. Errant button presses can happen in the heat of the moment, and in a tournament match, pausing the game means forfeiting the round. Other games have since adopted the idea, which Zaimont found one day in his inbox.

Zaimont didn't just have an eye on the competitive scene, however. While he certainly wanted his game to address the tournament player's frustrations, he also wanted it to appeal to complete beginners. That starts with the game's tutorial, which is still regarded as among the genre's best. Yes, it teaches you how to play *Skullgirls*. But more importantly, it also teaches you how to play fighting games, explaining the theory behind fundamental genre concepts, then having you put them into practice. "I've taught a lot of people how to play fighting games. I wanted the tutorial to actually make you learn, instead of just making you perform."

Defence was particularly important, Zaimont felt. "A lot of fighting-game tutorials are like, 'Block one hit. Nice work!' And then they never talk about defence again. It's just nuts. Defence is such a hugely important part of playing that is completely ignored because it doesn't look cool." One of the first things Zaimont designed was a tutorial about dealing with 'mix-ups', with an AI opponent randomly alternating between high and low attacks. He put it in front of as many novice players as he could, including *Skullgirls*' voice actors, who would pop into the office to see what their characters looked like before recording. "It usually took them around half an hour," he says. "First they were like, 'This is really hard'. Then at some point they would turn to me and say, 'Why aren't I holding down-back all the time?'" (This puts the character in a crouch-block position, enabling them to stand their ground, guard against all low attacks by default, and only have to adjust if the opponent tries to hit high.) "I was like, '*I don't know. Why aren't you?*' That was the point at which they would learn that, if you default to *something*, you can react to the other things."

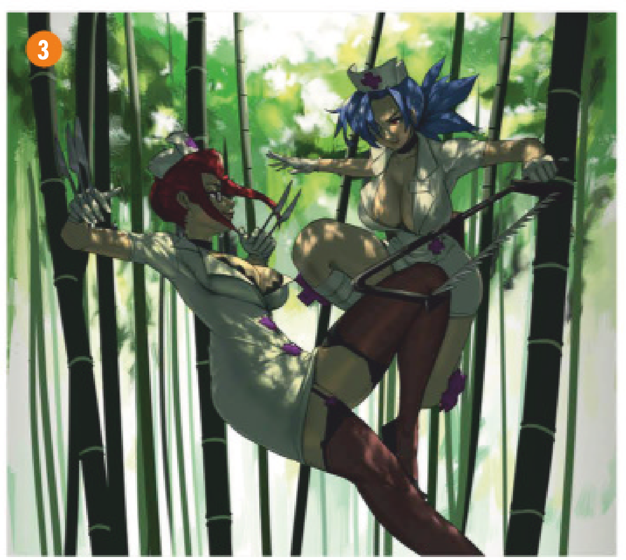
***Skullgirls* launched in** April 2012, selling 50,000 copies in its first week on consoles, a fine return for a game in a certain niche. It's a happy time for a game developer, the pressure of the final sprint behind you, the game out in the wild and being enjoyed by players old and new. Work began on DLC. Then, one day the following month, the entire team was laid off.

Def Jam Rapstar was already in legal trouble: record label EMI had filed an $8 million lawsuit against its developers, 4mm and Terminal Reality, shortly before *Skullgirls*' release, claiming none of the 54 songs featured in the game had been properly licensed for use. *Rapstar* had launched in 2010, and had tanked, only selling around half a million copies. It was funded through a $15 million loan from City National Bank, based on Autumn Games and Konami claiming it would sell 2.5 million (which the lawsuit called "baseless and unrealistic"). Two years later, not a penny had been repaid, and the bank wasn't happy. It wanted the money back, and $9 million in damages on top.

"We were working on Squigly, the first DLC character," *Skullgirls*' lead designer **Peter Bartholow** tells us. "The lawsuit had gotten pretty bad, and Konami was draining Autumn's finances through legal costs. Autumn was VC-funded; by having a claim against their income, nobody could fund them."

Autumn owned the *Skullgirls* IP, but in letting the team go made it clear that, if they wanted to

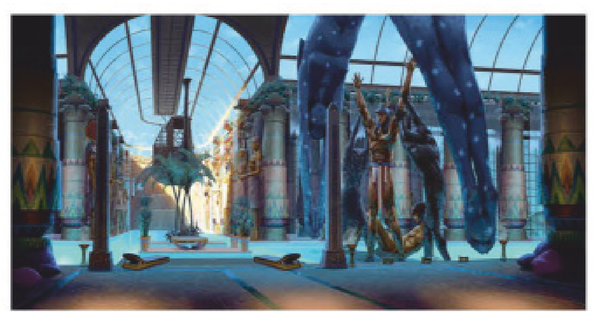






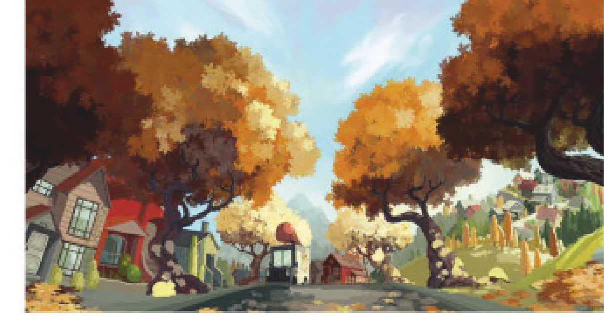




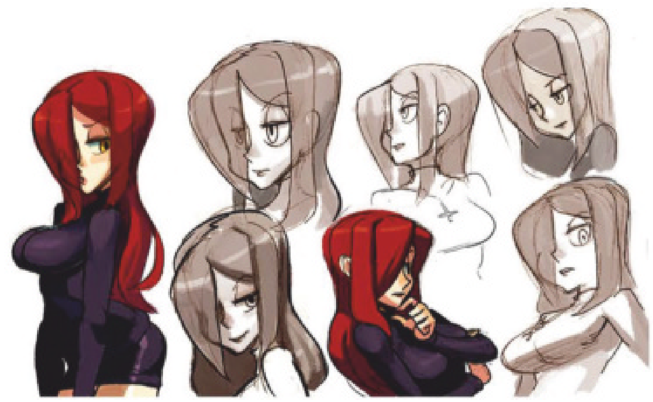




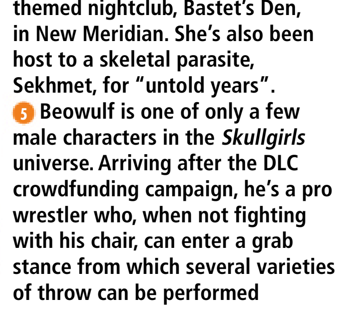


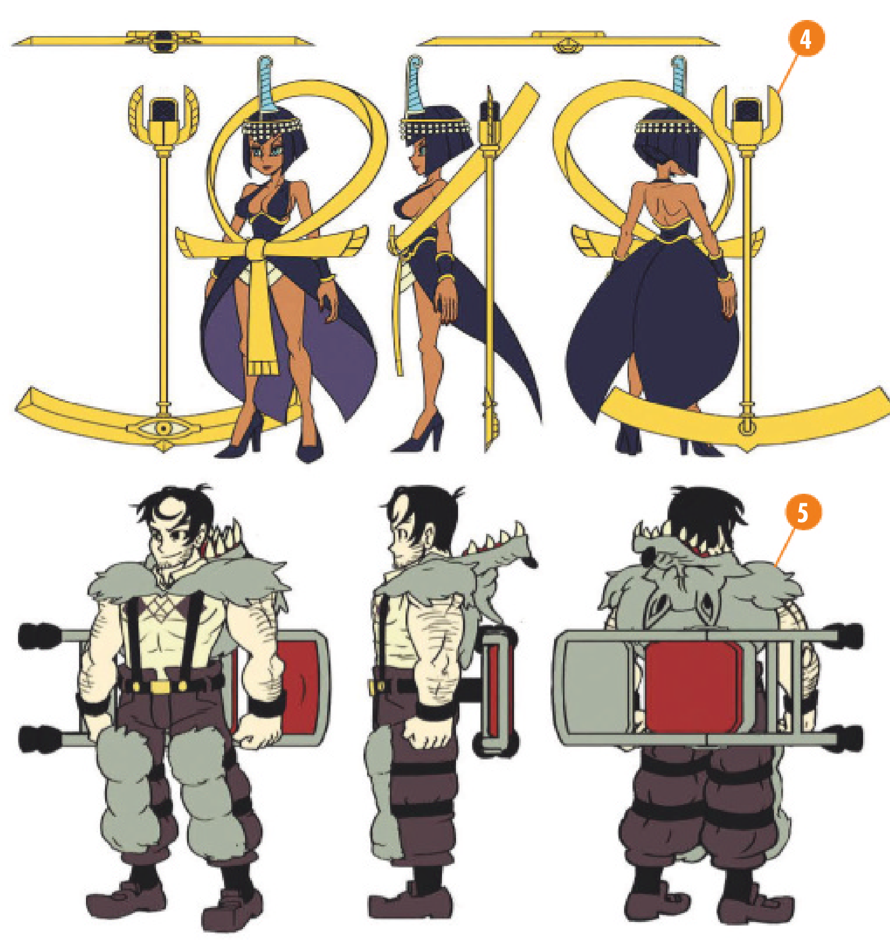












1 In a nod to Japanese fighting games, *Skullgirls*' character bios list likes, dislikes and blood type. Valentine's a fan of alcohol, wolves and taking things apart. Same.
2 Stage backgrounds reflect the varied influences on *Skullgirls*' art style: anime, golden-age cartoons, and dark deco, a style popularised in Batman: The Animated Series.
3 The exaggerated proportions of the game's predominantly female cast sparked a brief backlash that wasn't helped by Peter Bartholow hitting back at it. Alex Ahad, for his part, acknowledged that his fondness for drawing "monster-girls... is not for everyone."
4 The game's lore is intricate and, as you might expect from the character designs, absolutely off its head. Eliza, for example, is the star attraction at an Egyptian-themed nightclub, Bastet's Den, in New Meridian. She's also been host to a skeletal parasite, Sekhmet, for "untold years".
5 Beowulf is one of only a few male characters in the *Skullgirls* universe. Arriving after the DLC crowdfunding campaign, he's a pro wrestler who, when not fighting with his chair, can enter a grab stance from which several varieties of throw can be performed

continue to work on the game under a new studio name, it wouldn't stand in their way. Lab Zero Games was duly formed, with Bartholow its CEO. It operated with no funding for the best part of a year; while the DLC plan was shelved, the crew did manage to support the game with patches. "We decided, 'All right, we'll try this for a year until we can't handle it anymore and we'll see what happens'," Zaimont says. "When we got to that point we thought, 'Okay, we have two choices. We can quit now, or we can try crowdfunding, and then quit when it doesn't work. There's no real downside, because we don't have another choice. We'll try.'"

A crowdfunding campaign was planned, then put on hold. The organisers of Evo 2013 were running a charity donation drive, raising funds for breast cancer research; the game which brought in the most donations would be the final selection for the main stage at what is essentially the Super Bowl of fighting games, watched by millions the world over. *Skullgirls* was in contention, and Lab Zero decided to throw its young weight behind it. "We were in fierce competition with *Super Smash Bros Melee*," Bartholow says. "We raised $78,000 and they won with $95,000, but *Smash* would have won with $9,000 if we hadn't engaged with it. It was a really fun community experience, our voice actors got involved, and Evo was super gracious. Because we'd pushed the competition to levels they hadn't expected, they basically gave us 95 per cent of the prize. We weren't an official tournament game but we got stream time, we got some stage time. It helped *Skullgirls*' visibility a lot. And I think it primed people to be in a giving mood."

At the end of the charity drive, Lab Zero announced its crowdfunding campaign, seeking $150,000 on Indiegogo for the release of the long-planned DLC character Squigly. The team expected little. "It was kinda just to placate the people that kept telling us we should try it," Bartholow says. "We thought, best case, we'd fund Squigly and have some bridge money to keep us going until we could sign another project." Zaimont was so sure it would fail that he'd taken a job at Iron Galaxy, which had taken over development duties on Xbox One exclusive *Killer Instinct*. "We thought it was going to be closure," he says. "'We tried, we're sorry to all our fans, there's nothing we can do.'" Indeed, so low were his expectations that the campaign launched on his first day working on *Killer Instinct*. "We put the crowdfunding drive online and I went to work. We funded Squigly that night. The next day I came into the office and was like, 'Hello! I need to work less than four days a week'."

The campaign ended up raising over $850,000, reaching enough stretch goals for not one DLC character, but five. Great news, but not without its problems – while Squigly had been in the works for a while and the first stretch-goal character, Beowulf, wasn't far off, after that Lab Zero had nothing. It hadn't expected to succeed; the additional funding goals were for mystery characters for more reasons than piquing interest. Still, with money in the bank, they set to work.

Lab Zero was no longer working with Autumn Games, but still had to deal with Konami if it wanted its DLC characters on Xbox 360. As part of its publishing terms, Konami insisted on handling QA for the *Skullgirls* DLC, and was charging through the nose. The studio managed to strike a deal with its producer at Konami. "We would be able to use a thirdparty QA team that was cheaper," Bartholow says, "then Konami would do a final sweep for TRC before submission. But by the time we were ready to release Squigly, that producer had left the company.

"The lawsuit had been settled, but there was probably a lot of bad blood there. Konami wanted to dissolve the business relationship entirely, so were no longer interested in the deal we negotiated. We paid for all the thirdparty testing, then they insisted they would have to do it all again at their rates. We couldn't afford that. At that point Konami and Autumn moved to dissolve the relationship between them officially."

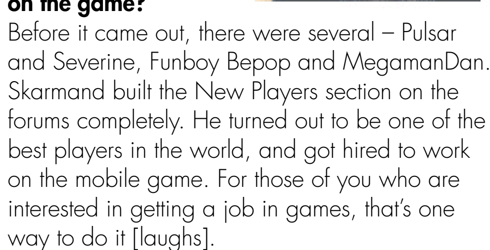
Not only did that leave *Skullgirls* without a publisher for its DLC; it also led Konami to demand the game be delisted from Xbox Live Arcade and PlayStation Network. The team had gone too far to give up now. The rebadged *Skullgirls Encore* was back on PSN within a couple of months, and the 360 version followed soon after. It made its way to Vita, to PS4 and Xbox One, to smartphones and Japanese arcades, and is currently in development for Nintendo Switch. Lab Zero, against all odds, is still here: *Skullgirls*' crowdfunding success has proved invaluable in the development of its current project, *Indivisible*, which has raised more than $2 million on Indiegogo.

It's a story with a happy ending, and one that many wouldn't have seen through to its conclusion. Many would, at some point or other, decide that the fates were conspiring against them, take the hint and walk away. In closing, we ask Zaimont how the team possibly kept up morale while everything around them seemed to be falling apart.

"We didn't," he says. "There were a lot of times where people were just, like, 'This really sucks'. Morale was not necessarily kept up, but making a fighting game had been the prime development goal I had. It was like, 'We have this thing. It exists, people are playing it, people like it. I can't let go of it without having done every possible thing that we can do.' Work for free, work nights and weekends – when you have something you can do, you're an idiot if you don't give it everything you can, because you can't come back to it later and give it more." ■



Mike Zaimont
Lead designer, *Skullgirls*

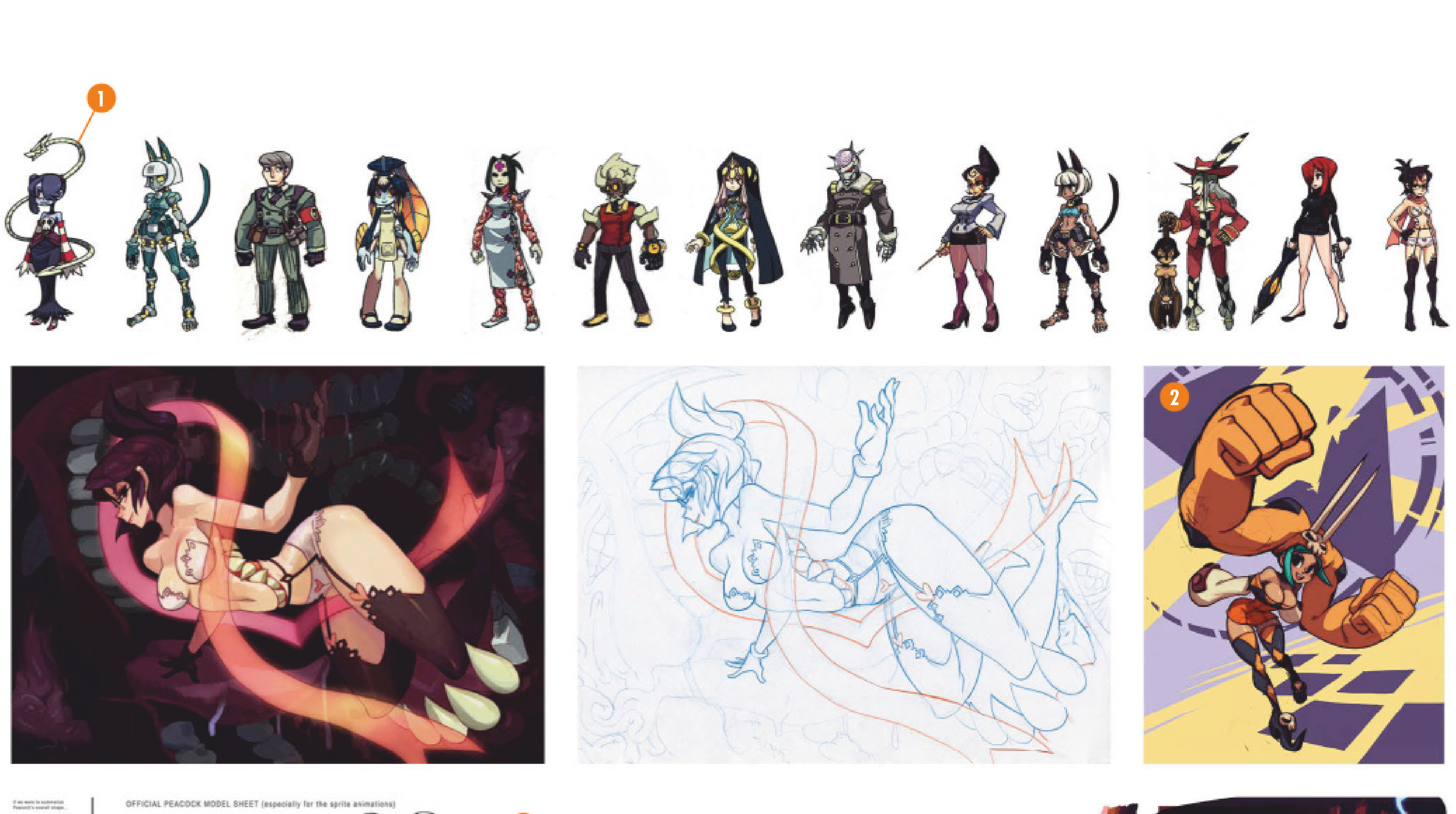


Which pro players were useful for giving feedback on the game?
Before it came out, there were several – Pulsar and Severine, Funboy Bepop and MegamanDan. Skarmand built the New Players section on the forums completely. He turned out to be one of the best players in the world, and got hired to work on the mobile game. For those of you who are interested in getting a job in games, that's one way to do it [laughs].

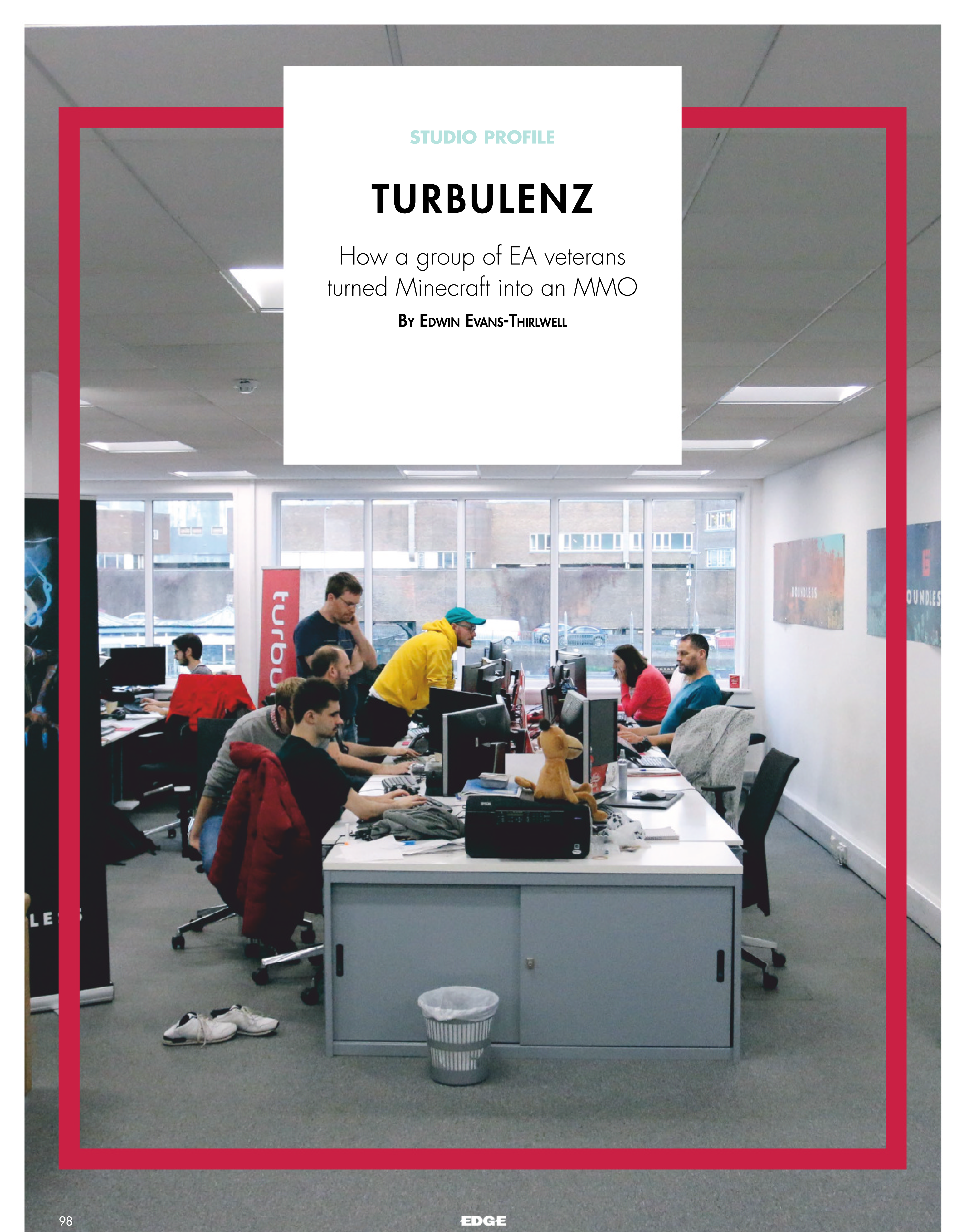
You took on *Smash Bros* in the Evo drive, and almost won. How do you feel about it now?
It was a pretty pivotal moment in the fighting-game community. *Smash* had only ever been at Evo once. It was treated pretty poorly. *Melee* won, and had one of the highest entrant counts that year. Ever since, *Smash* at Evo has been a thing and the fighting-game community has grown because of it. Even though I'm sad we didn't win, I sort of think *Melee* deserved it.

If you had the chance to make *Skullgirls* again, what would you do differently?
Not commit to the Vita version [laughs]. It was a giant nightmare. They don't tell you how long the loading times are, and they don't give you the right estimate for how much memory it has. It took as much work to get it on Vita as it did to get it on PS3 and Xbox, and a little bit of PC.

And what are you proudest of?
We were able to make, with no prior fighting-game experience, a fighting game that is still played at tournaments and still does not have a defined tier list. And it's an anime game that doesn't lose players when a new anime game comes out. Most of the community just moves on to the next thing. But the *Skullgirls* community? They still play *Skullgirls*.



1 The initial eight-character roster grew to 14 when the DLC plan was complete. This was instrumental in securing ***Skullgirls***' release in Japan, where a fighting game with so few characters stood no chance. 2 This artwork of Cerebella was one of several pieces used for a range of limited-edition custom arcade sticks produced by Tucson, Arizona company Arcade In A Box. 3 Peacock was part of the reason one publisher asked during a pitch meeting why all the characters were the same height. While she's shorter than most, her hat makes all the difference. Some taller characters fight in a stooped pose. 4 Squigly was the first DLC fighter to be released, and would have been out even sooner were it not for the Autumn Games lawsuit. 5 Ahad left copious notes for the animators, explaining problem areas that needed particular attention and providing narrative justification for outlandish or implausible attack animations



STUDIO PROFILE

TURBULENZ

How a group of EA veterans turned Minecraft into an MMO

By Edwin Evans-Thirlwell

![turbulenz]

Founded 2009
Employees 18
Key staff James Austin (chief executive officer), Gavin Shields (chief operating officer), David Galeano (chief technology officer)
URL wonderstruckgames.com
Selected softography *PolyCraft*, *The Marvellous Miss Take*
Current projects *Boundless*

Boundless is a sandbox MMORPG of uncommon resilience. Consider, for one thing, the hardiness of its geography. Four years since entering Early Access, it still resembles *Minecraft* with a splash of Avatar, but where *Minecraft*'s voxel vistas can be stripped to the bedrock, the planets of *Boundless* slyly repair themselves in your absence. Quarries are sucked back into the soil, trees regrown, structures erased save for those safeguarded by Beacons, each player's means of establishing ownership. The resources each region contains, however, vary their distribution each time, so even if you know the terrain you'll still need to poke around a bit. All this reflects a careful balance between allowing seasoned players to leave a mark while ensuring that there's plenty of 'unspoilt' wilderness for newcomers. "You don't want to go into a cave and discover that it's like an escalator going down, all lit up," Turbulenz co-founder and CEO **James Austin** says.

The regeneration system as it stands was not part of the original *Boundless* blueprint. It's the result of years of back-and-forth between the tiny, Guildford-based Turbulenz team and its community, with some players chalking up thousands of hours in a game that has seen over 200 updates. "We might have discovered that was required during development, but when we first planned out the game it wasn't on the to-do list," Austin goes on. "It emerged as players were manipulating the environment."

The roots of *Boundless* reach back to Austin's days as a tech manager at EA in the mid-noughties. The publisher had acquired a motley mix of game-development technologies via various acquisitions, and Austin's job was to identify the best tools and promote them to different teams. It was a chaotic time – EA employed well over 1,000 engineers worldwide, production costs were on the rise thanks to the advent of HD gaming, and Sony's notoriously oblique PlayStation 3 architecture posed difficulties for multiplatform teams. There was an urgent need, Austin says, for tools that would allow the creation of "high production value games without having to constantly fight against tech". In particular, he saw huge opportunity in web browsers and the idea of streaming parts of a game to the player on demand. Having left EA in 2008, Austin and a small group of former EA directors and programmers set out to make these ideas a reality.

To begin with, Turbulenz was purely a tech company. Over the ensuing two years, it sought to pitch its eponymous engine and expertise to a selection of industry big-hitters. "We spent quite a bit of time talking with platform owners, like people own browsers – Microsoft, Google, Mozilla. We also spent a long time doing consultancy for large-ish companies that had an interest in the web space. What can we do in the browser that has never been done before?" Other studios were hesitant, however, to embrace the concept of fully web-based game development. "We could do stuff in the browser that nobody else could do," Austin says. "But we were only really getting traction through bits of consultancy, and we were finding it really hard to convince, let's say, 'classic' game developers that this was a viable way of making games. Even though we could demonstrate it, people would say, 'Well, we already make games with this engine, we already have all this stuff. How do we sell the games? Where's the store for that?'"



Prior to founding Turbulenz as CEO, James Austin worked for EA, including a stint as technical director at Criterion

"WE HAD A PARTNER WHO WANTED US TO FOCUS FULL-TIME ON BOUNDLESS. WE THOUGHT OKAY, FINE, LET'S GO ALL IN"

The studio concluded that on its own a proof-of-concept build wasn't persuasive enough – it needed to actually make and release games using its own tools. The result was 2013's *Polycraft*, a Javascript-based multiplayer tower-defence game, published under the company's new Wonderstruck label. As a showcase for the Turbulenz engine Polycraft did its job perfectly, but enthusiasm for the project within the team was limited. "And I thought this was weird," Austin reflects. "We're quite a small team – how do we make a game that we don't enjoy? We have to do differently with our next project."

Where *Polycraft* was perhaps too obviously a composite of existing genres, 2014's *The Marvellous Miss Take* was more of a passion project with a distinct identity – a retro heist adventure notable for its gadgets and reactive guard AI. Seeking to expand its clout beyond PC, Turbulenz approached Sony about publishing the game on PS4. The publisher was unconvinced, but its attention was caught by the studio's third and larger project, a sandbox affair then titled *Oort Online*, an attempt to turn *Minecraft* into an MMORPG. To Turbulenz, the game that would become *Boundless* made sense partly because, as a systems-driven affair, it side-stepped the need for a gigantic art department. To Sony, it appealed firstly because the PlayStation 4 had nothing like it, and secondly because as a crossplatform live simulation, it was a way of extending the brand's presence beyond the living room.

Sony's support effected a sea-change at Turbulenz – from using games to showcase its tech, to building tech in the service of a game. "We were struggling to commercialise a pure technology business, and we had a partner who wanted us to focus full-time on *Boundless*," Austin says. "And we thought, 'Okay, fine, let's go all in on that'." Prior to capturing the publisher's interest, the company had sought to crowdfund the project, releasing a prototype in 2014 with funding goals available via its own website. Austin and his colleagues considered Kickstarter, but were wary of its "all-or-nothing" ethos. "We were quite nervous about going all-in with, 'We need a million pounds' or whatever – going from low awareness and building up very quickly," he says.

Thanks to some savvy promotion and the then-scarcity of serious *Minecraft* competitors, *Boundless* soon found a following on PC. One sacrifice the studio had to make, however, was ▶





The game's most committed players, who've packed in hundreds of hours of playtime, are often also its fiercest Steam reviewers, panning it over a single update. Still, as James Austin puts it, "If I only wanted positive feedback, I'd only talk to my mum"

the idea of running it in a browser. "Players said, 'We don't want to go to a website, we just want to go to our Steam library'," Austin says. "They wanted something that wasn't as technically progressive." It was the first in a series of adjustments as the studio learned to treat its audience as a fellow collaborator, "another voice" in the room. "Many games historically used Early Access as a stepping stone to release," Austin says. "We were in Early Access from the very beginning of our development process, which did cause us challenges, because we had this persistent universe we were trying to develop, but which I think ultimately taught us an awful lot."

Part of the journey was, inevitably, dealing with the community's lack of knowledge about the rigours of development. "Players don't appreciate how long it takes to make a game," Austin says. "We're not the world's biggest team, and people were like, 'We know what we want and we want it now – go.' And we said, 'Sorry, but game development takes years, especially when you're trying to do something that's new.'" In a bid to demystify the process, the team has made portions of the data it gathers about player activities visible to players themselves. Planets and biomes, for example, have live resource breakdowns that explicate the inner workings of the terrain regeneration system. By popping a resource into your portable Atlas, you can access a resource heatmap for the area you're in.

Another major challenge has been balancing rates of progression across a huge range of player disciplines, time investments and degrees of cooperation. *Boundless* attracts a wide variety of personalities. There are *Minecraft* veterans who are happy to live alongside others but essentially want to do everything themselves, and migrants from older MMOs who have formed alliances in Discord channels for the sake of grander construction projects. There are players who just want to trade – there are around 5,000 in-game shops at the time of writing – and those who spend their days hunting on the outlying planets. There are players who play for five hours a night, and players who dip in for one hour a week.

Ensuring that everybody can make headway regardless of playstyle is a moving target for Turbulenz. Among the game's methods of modulating the difficulty is a recurring event whereby a meteor impact unleashes a wave of hostile creatures: the intensity of the threat scales to reflect the number and level of players nearby. Even as it works to even out progression across the playerbase, Turbulenz is mindful that unearthing ways of beating the systems is part of the draw for a sandbox player. The economy, for instance, is largely in the hands of the audience – "if you can sell things for double the price of everybody else, well done," Austin observes – though Turbulenz has declined to enable certain kinds of wheeling and dealing. There's currently no formal process for selling land, for example, as this might encourage canny players to bed in alongside new arrivals, forcing the victim to buy their plot before they can expand.

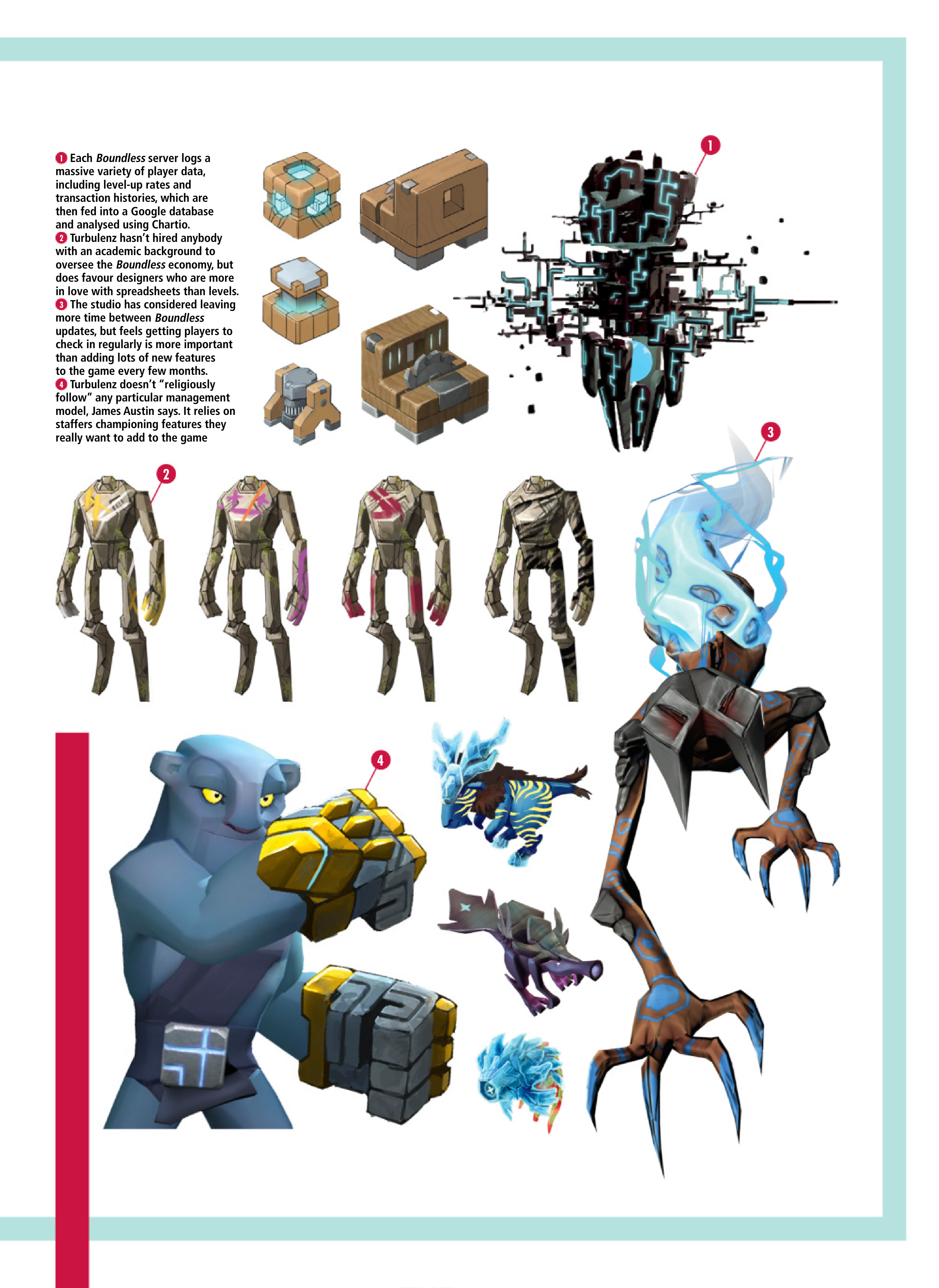
The developer has "made a Herculean effort" to leave the player-shaped landscapes of *Boundless* intact from update to update – some of the larger structures in the Early Access universe were years in the making. For *Boundless*'s official launch, however, it has opted to begin afresh. "We wanted a new, modern universe, because we'd developed features that were very hard to migrate," Austin says. "And we wanted all players to start the game together, rather than anybody saying, 'We've been playing for four years – catch up'." Turbulenz did, however, let its Early Access players into the 1.0 version a few weeks ahead, so that launch-day buyers wouldn't find themselves in an empty world. It's a precarious moment for a game like *Boundless*; it's reliant for much of its complexity on what players have built within it, yet must also leave space for beginners.

The 1.0 build has yet to set any player activity records, but Austin predicts a "gradual build-up" in popularity. "We're working with Square Enix on PC, and their ambition is that kind of a year after launch it'll be at full speed, rather than trying to go really big at launch." The game is a known quantity, he points out, which has made kindling excitement at release difficult, but in the meantime, Turbulenz will stick to its schedule of an update every couple of weeks. Ideas on the table include farming mechanics and player spacecraft – travel between planets currently occurs via portals.

"THE REASON WE HAVEN'T PUBLISHED A ROADMAP IS THAT I KNOW FOR A FACT THE PLAN WILL CHANGE"

"We've got stuff from our original goal funding that still hasn't been done!" Austin adds. "And the reason we haven't published a roadmap is that I know for a fact that the plan will change. Maybe when we do farming we'll say, 'What really adds to the game now is animal breeding'. Based on what we know of how much *Boundless* changed during development, for us just to write down that it'll be like this and this – I already know that's the wrong answer." ■

1 Each *Boundless* server logs a massive variety of player data, including level-up rates and transaction histories, which are then fed into a Google database and analysed using Chartio.
2 Turbulenz hasn't hired anybody with an academic background to oversee the *Boundless* economy, but does favour designers who are more in love with spreadsheets than levels.
3 The studio has considered leaving more time between *Boundless* updates, but feels getting players to check in regularly is more important than adding lots of new features to the game every few months.
4 Turbulenz doesn't "religiously follow" any particular management model, James Austin says. It relies on staffers championing features they really want to add to the game





REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL SWITCHING

Sega Mega Drive Classics Collection Switch
This retro compendium has been available elsewhere for an age – it first launched for PC in 2010 – but Switch feels like its natural home. With PlayStation Classic such a disappointment, this faultless selection of games, generous array of graphics filters and pleasingly daft '90s-living-room UI is a timely reminder that retro classics, when done this well, can still be quite a delight.

Into The Breach Switch
The **Edge** Awards are always an awkward time: everyone's exhausted from the Q4 rush and needs a break, and now we have to go to a meeting room for a three-hour series of arguments. But the deliberation process is also an excuse to revisit some of the year's best games. *Into The Breach* was already brilliant on PC. On Switch, it's perilously close to being perfect.

Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker Switch
One boards a long-haul flight with such noble intentions. Some transcription, a preview or two, perhaps an arthouse film. Then you realise your brain and body are mush. *Toad*'s bite-sized puzzle-boxes prove a perfect tonic, each short-lived level a shot of energy and joy administered straight to the frazzled eyeballs. In Uptown Downtown and its New Donk City theme we might finally have found the cure to jetlag.

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE



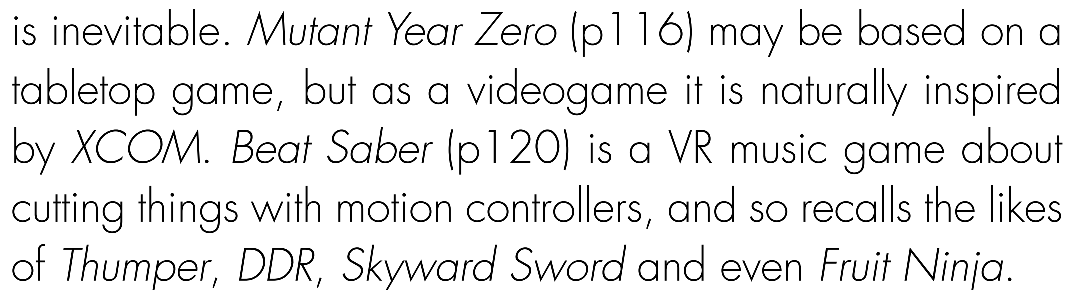
Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Play content

Bad cover version

When Picasso said 'great artists steal', he wasn't telling his peers and colleagues to abandon their canvas and reach for the tracing paper. Whatever the artform, good ideas will always spread, yet if you're going to borrow from someone else, you should probably try to be subtle about it. There's a profound difference between wearing your influences on your sleeve, and simply tearing your inspiration's arm off.

Heading this month's Play section is *Just Cause 4* (p104), the latest in a series that's all about physics and the carnage they can cause. Developer Avalanche knows a good idea when it sees it, and *Metal Gear Solid V*'s Fulton balloon is a perfect conceptual fit for *Just Cause*'s brand of explosive slapstick. It's a welcome addition, and a necessary one for a series that's beginning to feel a little tired.

Most games slot neatly into genres, meaning a certain amount of magpieing is inevitable. *Mutant Year Zero* (p116) may be based on a tabletop game, but as a videogame it is naturally inspired by *XCOM*. *Beat Saber* (p120) is a VR music game about cutting things with motion controllers, and so recalls the likes of *Thumper*, *DDR*, *Skyward Sword* and even *Fruit Ninja*.





The idea, then, is to draw inspiration from elsewhere and use it to make your own work better. Yet this is a delicate balance. Be too brazen about it and you'll only end up inviting the obvious comparison, and if your game isn't good enough, you'll suffer for it.

Gwyn only knows, we love Hidetaka Miyazaki's work as much as anyone. But this month both *Ashen* (p108) and *Darksiders III* (p112) arrive in *Souls* clothes, and their pilfering only amplifies the relative chasm in quality between them and the games to which they pay homage. We love a good remix, don't get us wrong. But we're over tribute acts.

Just Cause 4

Developer Avalanche Studios
Publisher Square Enix
Format PC (tested), PS4, Xbox One
Release Out now

Just Cause 4 is an open-world game that delights in frustrating itself, tipping upside-down mid-stride as though caught on one of its own tethers. Its fundamental issue may be sheer overfamiliarity – this is, once again, a straight-to-VHS superspy escapade in which agile bullet-sponge Rico Rodriguez blows up any and all red objects while toppling a tyrant – but its more aggravating trait is how it introduces brilliant tools only to bury them in moribund mission and interface design. It remains a hoot in short bursts, and grows on you with practice, but there's the strong sense here of a series that has run its term.

Chief among the new features is Rodriguez's expanded grapple, which (when it's permitted to) adds some demented flourishes to a sandbox that is already madder than a sack of badgers. His base abilities are as in the previous game – a long-ranged grapple line, a parachute for graceful descents and a wingsuit for speedy gliding across an island's worth of military bases. Traversal aside, you can use the grapple to lash objects and people together with a retracting tether, or attach boosters to cable ends to send targets spinning away like fireworks. New to the mix are Fulton balloons, an idea borrowed from *Metal Gear Solid V* and just as entertaining here, which at their most elementary allow you to lift guards out of cover. Pleasantly silly in themselves, these tools are all the sillier when used together, and there's much more headroom for experimentation this time because you can deploy a larger number of tethers from the off.

You might rope a whole squad to their own jeep, throw in a couple of balloons and a booster and watch as the resultant screaming cat's cradle careens down the hillside, before shooting out the balloons to drop it on an airport. You could also stick balloons and boosters to a tank to create a very ungainly hovership. The balloons may be on loan from Big Boss, but they feel like a natural addition to *Just Cause*'s eccentric toolbox, in as much as there's anything 'natural' about driving into town with a couple of floating goats attached to your fender.

Moreover, behind each grapple ability lurks a fearsome depth of unlockable modifiers. Among other tricks, you can make balloons float towards your crosshair, the better to steer that makeshift hovership, or armour-plate them to avoid premature popping. You can dial up the power of your retractor cables and set them to snap when they reach minimum length, catapulting objects across valleys. You can set boosters to fire in the direction of the camera, so they'll always propel objects away from you, and have them explode when they deactivate.

The catch to all this is that the tethering mechanic feels overloaded – Avalanche might have done better to give boosters and balloons their own buttons – though this is partly because the reworked interface is so poor. There are three customisable grapple profiles, which means you can switch between the retractor, balloons and boosters freely, but the associated HUD indicator is an easily misread confection of colour-coded strips and letters. Customising profiles, meanwhile, involves a tour of the game's fussy and frustrating menus, which are riddled with counter-intuitive design choices – using the 2 and 3 keys to switch tabs, for instance, rather than the arrow keys.

It makes the thought of using your tools to their full offputting, and all of that's on top of the finickiness of basic movement and grappling. An elegant-enough creature in the air, Rodriguez handles like a wheelie bin on the ground and struggles with simple platforming gambits. His ledge mantle is curiously ineffective – given the emphasis on rapid traversal, it really feels like you should be able to scamper up walls like one of Ubisoft's assassins – and the grapple proves a fiddly instrument in built-up regions. When climbing a structure with an overhang, such as a sniper's watchtower, it's common to end up dangling helplessly beneath the ledge. It's just as well Rodriguez can soak up so many bullets, because you'll spend as much time battling the architecture as the grunts hiding within it.

If any game needs a button dedicated simply to blowing things up, it's this one



The shooting is sharper than before thanks to a new aim-down-sights feature, but remains perfunctory – more about thinning the herd so you can concentrate on your grapple mods than having fun. All the weapons now have an alternate fire mode: one of the rifles spits out a combat drone, while the sniper rifle packs an underslung rocket launcher. It's entertaining stuff, but the trade-off is that there's no slot for throwable grenades or C4. This makes it harder to kick off the chain explosions that remain *Just Cause*'s biggest draw, with radio towers going up like cabaret lines and fuel tanks rampaging though bases on a jet of flame. If any game needs a button dedicated simply to blowing things up, it's this one. There are, at least, new B-movie weapons to ease the pain of loss, including a wind cannon powerful enough to kick jet fighters sideways and a lightning gun that triggers a thunderstorm.

Dynamic weather events are the headline new terrain features – tornadoes and lightning bolts aside, you'll tangle with visibility-killing sandstorms and blizzards – but the more fundamental change is in how you conquer that terrain. Where the previous game saw Rico flipping regions just by causing enough devastation within them, this one requires you to complete a story mission per region in the bargain. You can also only take over regions next to friendly territory, rather than ranging the map. This stronger running order pushes the story to the fore and creates a more obvious escalation in mission complexity, though you can still ▶



LEFT Balloons can be programmed to follow you around under their own power, allowing the prudent agent of chaos to keep an anti-aircraft tank on hand to deal with any close encounters aloft. MAIN Missions that unlock grapple mods are tied to three characters: a film director, an up-and-coming rebel and a researcher delving into the island's hidden history. BOTTOM The AI is smarter this time around, able to follow Rodriguez's movements in a battle if not always navigate the wreckage in his wake, but you can disengage easily by aiming for the horizon





ABOVE Pull your chute or spread your wings in the vicinity of a weather event like a tornado and you risk being thrown miles off-course. Fortunately, even the most extreme weather can't kill you by itself

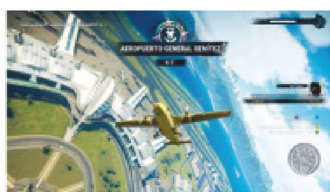


pootle around within areas in your free time, chasing up side activities.

The new approach suggests an underlying awareness that *Just Cause*'s sandbox isn't quite diverting enough in itself to prop up a 20-hour campaign: it needs a backbone to give the carnage direction and tease out the more colourful applications of its gizmos. The trouble is, *Just Cause*'s story continues to be a thin gruel of wisecracks, cheap sentiment and hacker jargon – all the less enticing for the discovery that Rodriguez has a long-lost father – and the missions are hit-and-miss.

The big beats can, in fairness, be tremendous. One climatic encounter sees you freeing a blimp from its silo, then grappling your way around a column of weather balloons to get close to it and hack its computer. Airstrikes subsequently destroy the blimp, but you can complete the hack by freefalling alongside its wreck while fending off helicopters. And then there's the mission where you guide an artificial tornado towards a city, darting perilously from skyscraper to skyscraper as the storm tugs you off course. It's quite the spectacle, but for every bout of tornado-chasing there are ten missions where you must activate consoles within a time limit, destroy a trio of generators or escort slow-moving groups of prisoners to a base exit.

The repetitiveness and simplicity of these scenarios theoretically leaves room for imaginative solutions, but no amount of noodling around with retractor cables can disguise the fact that your objectives are boring; moreover, the timed missions pressure you to be efficient rather than creative. The same goes for many of the sidequests, a parade of speed challenges, getaway skits and assassinations reliant on tired open-world



FRIENDLY FLIERS

As in *Just Cause 3*, you can have weapons, vehicles and props delivered to your current location by parachute – this time, there are several pilots with customisable loadouts, allowing for multiple deliveries at once. This abundance of backup makes it easy to create chaotic scenarios, even when the vicinity is quite bare. Every base looks better with a couple of wind cannon emplacements, for example. The shipping crates items arrive in also double as blunt implements when surrounded by enemies. Be wary of calling them in while wandering the higher ground, however – the crates won't disgorge their contents unless they're on level ground, and you may find yourself chasing a stray one down a hillside.

So often a mess down on the ground, *Just Cause 4* is usually graceful in the air – you pull the terrain beneath you with the grapple, using the parachute to regain height and the wingsuit for speed. Flying is exhilarating

setups such as the movie director in search of extra-violent footage. You'll need to grind these out if you're to unlock those grappling ability mods – a bafflingly miserly approach to the game's best new features.

In addition to being an uneven piece of design, *Just Cause 4* is a lumpy work of technology. Some textures are low-quality, and the lighting switches queasily when you head indoors, as though initiating a flashback. The game's engine isn't a match for the speed of your movement through the world: environmental pop-up is endemic, and reinforcements sometimes spawn in plain view. At the time of writing the cutscene audio doesn't match the animations, and character details such as hair are often subject to migraine-inducing flicker.

The waywardness of the physics and AI are easier to forgive in a game with such a taste for ludicrous knock-on effects. It's hard not to laugh when your helicopter reacts to a bump from a UAV as though dropkicked by Zeus – providing it doesn't stop you from beating a mission countdown, anyway. Likewise, there's something endearing about the uproar that sometimes results when you leave the world to its own devices. Black Hand pilots regularly fly into mountains, and civilian cars make an absolute meal of intersections, even when not fighting the effects of balloons and boosters. It's an apt setting for a game engaged in one long act of self-sabotage. Given a willingness to play around in the face of steady discouragement, *Just Cause 4* has much to offer, and it still does a great line in blast cloud. But so much is old, and so much is broken, that it's hard to know where to go from here.

6

Post Script

How Just Cause 4 taps into the restless spirit of mid-budget gaming

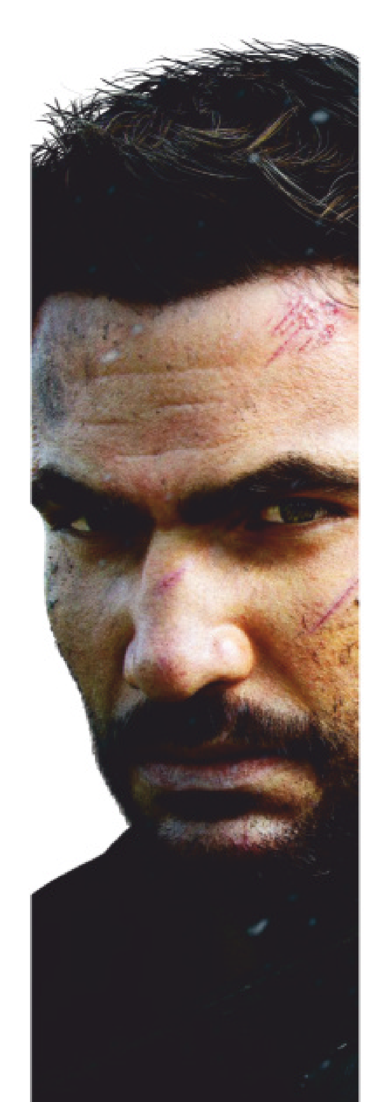
Just Cause 4 has been described online as a 'double-A' game, generally in tones of furtive appreciation. It's worth pondering what exactly that term has meant and means today. On the one hand, it's a very shaky commercial label derived from the better-known 'triple-A' (which was itself reportedly coined by marketing teams at gaming conventions), referring to a scale of production somewhere south of *Grand Theft Auto V* but rather north of *Spelunky*. It evokes, moreover, a period leading up to the mid-noughties, when the high street remained a force to be reckoned with, retail games weren't quite as expensive to make or distribute, and there was more room for more adventurous experiences from smaller teams. As time went by, or so the legend goes, the market became increasingly divided between the top subset of retail releases that could actually turn a profit, and a swelling horde of tiny independent teams who sold their work over the internet. Hence the demise of mid-tier publishers like Midway, creator of such outwardly shoddy but strangely worthwhile fare as *Psi-Ops: The Mindgate Conspiracy* and *Stranglehold*.

According to this extremely fast-and-loose gloss of videogame-industry history, 'double-A' is well behind us, and yet its spectre persists. Perhaps that's because the label today applies more to an ethos than an event. It clings on not because it has any real foundation as a historical term, but because it has come to embody a set of values, retrospectively imposed by players and developers who miss the likes of *Psi-Ops*. It is a specific personality of game, constructed according to an idea of what gaming can be that is a touch more experimental and forgiving than today's big-money blockbuster culture will allow.

Such games are not to be judged purely on their production values and design elegance, much as they might often try for the same narratives, themes, styles and degrees of completeness as, say, an *Uncharted* or *Battlefield*. They are permitted to be eccentric, breakable, sold as much on the strength of their scrapes, waywardness and lack of overall unity as for how nice their guns feel to fire, or the impeccability of their scripting. They have something of the flair of the arthouse, but they are nonetheless marketed as entertainment. They are often compared to B-movies in being works of half-knowing excess, and much as with B-movies, the odd ideas they may harbour often find a wider reach for not being taken that seriously.

Viewing *Just Cause 4* through this lens – as we begin to in our discussion of the physics and AI at the end of our review – threatens to save it from its own frustrations, or at least, to show them in a new, kindlier light. The game doesn't announce itself as a 'double-A' work – the term is too nebulous to be directly invoked, and in any case, cult film directors rarely announce that they're actually trying to make a cult film – but its writing nonetheless invites the association. The threadbare script may be not worth your time, but it is also well aware of the fact, and thus unafraid of wasting it: many of the cutscenes consist of pointlessly drawn-out situation gags, with Rodriguez playing straight foil to some overacted goof till the conversation belatedly gets round to an objective.

'Double-A' as a term offers to bridge the gap between mega-blockbuster and niche indie



In that atmosphere, some of the game's technical flaws start to feel like they have a place, if not a purpose. The sight of a running man absent-mindedly shoving an entire fragment of radar tower ahead of him is no longer cause for a refund, but part of the same absurd carnival as the act of tethering cows to helicopters. The ability to turn your weapons on bases you've conquered, wrecking your hapless allies for points which can be spent to further the war effort, comes to feel boisterous rather than contradictory. There is the sense of a team laughing at itself, at its own failures, even as it sets out to deliver another monument of blockbuster entertainment, garnished with all the usual talk of revolutionary game engines and never-before-seen features.

If the spirit of the double-A game still lives, then what's the use of it? Perhaps it can serve as a way of breaking the ice of an enthusiast culture that has become utterly polarised, with 'triple-A' at one end and 'indie' at the other. As regards how they are discussed online, the two are separate realms, never to meet halfway. We might look to indie gaming for experiences motivated by more than a desire for profit, but in branding these games as such we also sideline them, placing them beyond the remit of so-called mainstream audiences and thus, limiting their relevance. The label comes to reflect the priority of a marketing machine that wants to regard *Call Of Duty* or *Fortnite* as the centre and games like *Far: Lone Sails* or *Owlboy* as the periphery. By contrast, games badged as 'triple-A' are reduced to a formulaic notion of excellence that trades in content and polish.

These are deep-seated structural problems, of course, rather than some trivial question of category, but if how we categorise things is part of the problem it can be part of the solution, too. 'Double-A' today is a term with healing applications, in as much as it offers to bridge the gap between mega-blockbuster and niche indie. It refers to self-declared 'mainstream' games that seek their share of the limelight alongside the industry's juggernauts, but which refuse to be held to the same, deadening standards. ■

Ashen

There are two words that, as much as they have become a handy comparison for a certain kind of game, are inevitable when describing *Ashen*. FromSoftware's reinvention of the dungeon crawler was seminal, spawning an entire subgenre around its particular set of innovations – but we've never seen a *Dark Souls* tribute quite as direct as this.

Each of the key components of a *Souls* game has a direct analogue here. Bonfires become Ritual Stones, the place where you return after dying, the world having reset in your absence. Souls become Scoria, a currency, surely named with tongue firmly in cheek, collected by defeating enemies and dropped in the world when you die, challenging you to push back to the point of your defeat to reclaim it. Estus Flasks become sips from the Crimson Gourd, a limited supply of healing potions that automatically refills at each resting place.

This isn't unusual, necessarily – these are by now the elements of a distinct genre. But the lore of *Ashen*'s fantasy world also sticks tightly to the usual *Souls* themes of light and dark, death and rebirth. The game is set at the close of the Age Of Man, as a reawakened bird god brings daylight back to the world. Because its inhabitants have lived in an eternal night, though, this light brings with it a mysterious sickness.

Visually, *Ashen* doesn't so much run with these concepts as sprint flat-out. While the premise and mechanics might be familiar, its graphical style is unlike anything else. This is obvious right from the character creator, as you notice the avatar you're bringing to life has a smooth, mannequin-like surface where their face should be. It's a striking artistic decision that works because this same minimalism applies across the entire game. The world is made up of beautifully uneven geometry. When light falls on the flat, polygonal surface of a wall or rock or piece of clothing, there is a chalky quality to it. You can almost feel the texture on your fingertips, like a smooth pebble picked out of a rocky beach. Paired with a muted and occasionally sickly colour palette, *Ashen* communicates the sense that this is a world covered in a thin layer of aesthetically pleasing dust, where light is a recent invention.

That world, presented as a single open map, is a pleasure to explore. It's low on the shortcuts and interconnecting routes you expect from a Soulslike, but pushing into corners is encouraged and often rewarded. The game dangles items, marked with glowing white icons, just out of reach – on high ledges, around impassable corners, off the edges of cliffs. Figuring out how to access them is one of *Ashen*'s greater pleasures. It's not exactly *Breath Of The Wild*, but the game lets you clamber your way to most spots – including ones that seem off-limits – through a mix of vaulting, a generous sprint jump and partner-assisted climbing.

Developer Aurora44
Publisher Annapurna Interactive
Format PC, Xbox One (tested)
Release Out now

You're rarely alone, which is probably the game's biggest divergence from the Souls template



LOREFUL GOOD
Ashen opens with a creation myth which borrows, especially in its world tree, imagery from Norse mythology, but quickly veers off in its own direction. The titular Ashen is an enormous bird god, who created the world with three breaths, each triggering a new age – of the Elder Dark, the gigantic Listeners and finally humans. You enter its world just as the last of those ends. As well as *Dark Souls*, there's more than a pinch of *Destiny* to all of the carefully crafted waffle about magical light-wielding creatures. You're directly contributing to and interacting with this myth as you play, so it isn't just a case of someone being too keen to show off their story bible, and, depending on your tolerance for this kind of thing, is actually engaging.

Yep, partners. You're rarely alone in *Ashen*, which is probably the game's biggest divergence from the *Souls* template. While From's games allow you to summon another player for assistance, or be invaded by one with more nefarious intentions, *Ashen* constantly pairs you with a fellow adventurer. Initially, this role is filled by a computer-controlled NPC, but as you progress these AI characters get substituted for real human players whose games happen to have converged with your own.

The impact of this addition is felt most clearly when you're locked in battle. Combat offers the usual range of options: one-handed weapons with a shield or lantern to light the way; weightier and more powerful two-handers; projectiles in the form of throwing spears. Each weapon has a light and heavy attack, while enemies' attacks can be dodged or absorbed with your shield, both of which drain your stamina bar. It's functional, but certainly not as fine-tuned as the games by which it is inspired. Fighting alongside a partner fundamentally alters its rhythm, for good and ill. They take some of the heat off your back, but AI characters in particular have a tendency to rush in, finishing off a combatant just as you're charging up that last carefully timed heavy attack. As combat isn't that inherently satisfying, this can make it tempting to just stand back and let them do the hard work. After all, you get that precious Scoria either way.

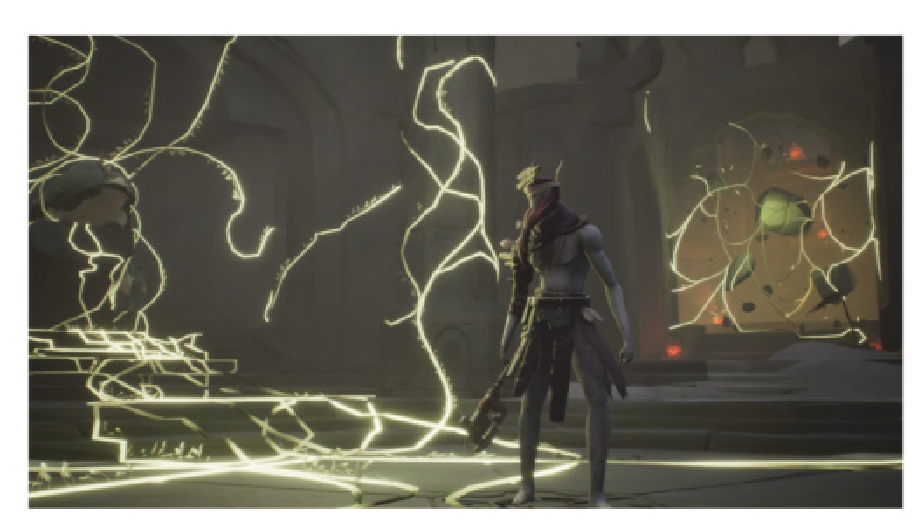
Ashen's other great departure from the *Souls* formula lies within its structure, which is closer to a traditional RPG or MMO. The game's structural backbone is essentially a series of fetch quests – go here, grab this item or kill this many creatures, then return for your reward. It's rather stilted, especially when the character who gave you the quest is the same one accompanying you on it, standing silently by your side as you achieve the goal, then suddenly returning to their usual spot in the village when you arrive so they can congratulate you on victory.

The occasional trips into dungeons fare better, mostly because the game is willing to turn out the lights, switch off the map markers and let you push ahead into the unknown, knowing that something deadly awaits you at the bottom. This is the feeling that familiar arrangement of waypoints, droppable resources and rechargeable health flasks is designed to achieve. Reaching a Ritual Stone when you're at the last of your health, or battling your way to a huge deposit of Scoria, is a deeply satisfying moment. But these instances also put *Ashen* directly in the shadow of the games it borrows them from. With combat that feels lightweight and inexact by comparison, in service of a broader structure which doesn't quite suit the core mechanics, the game's strengths – in particular, that winning, distinctive aesthetic – don't provide enough of a spark to let *Ashen* find its own way in the dark.

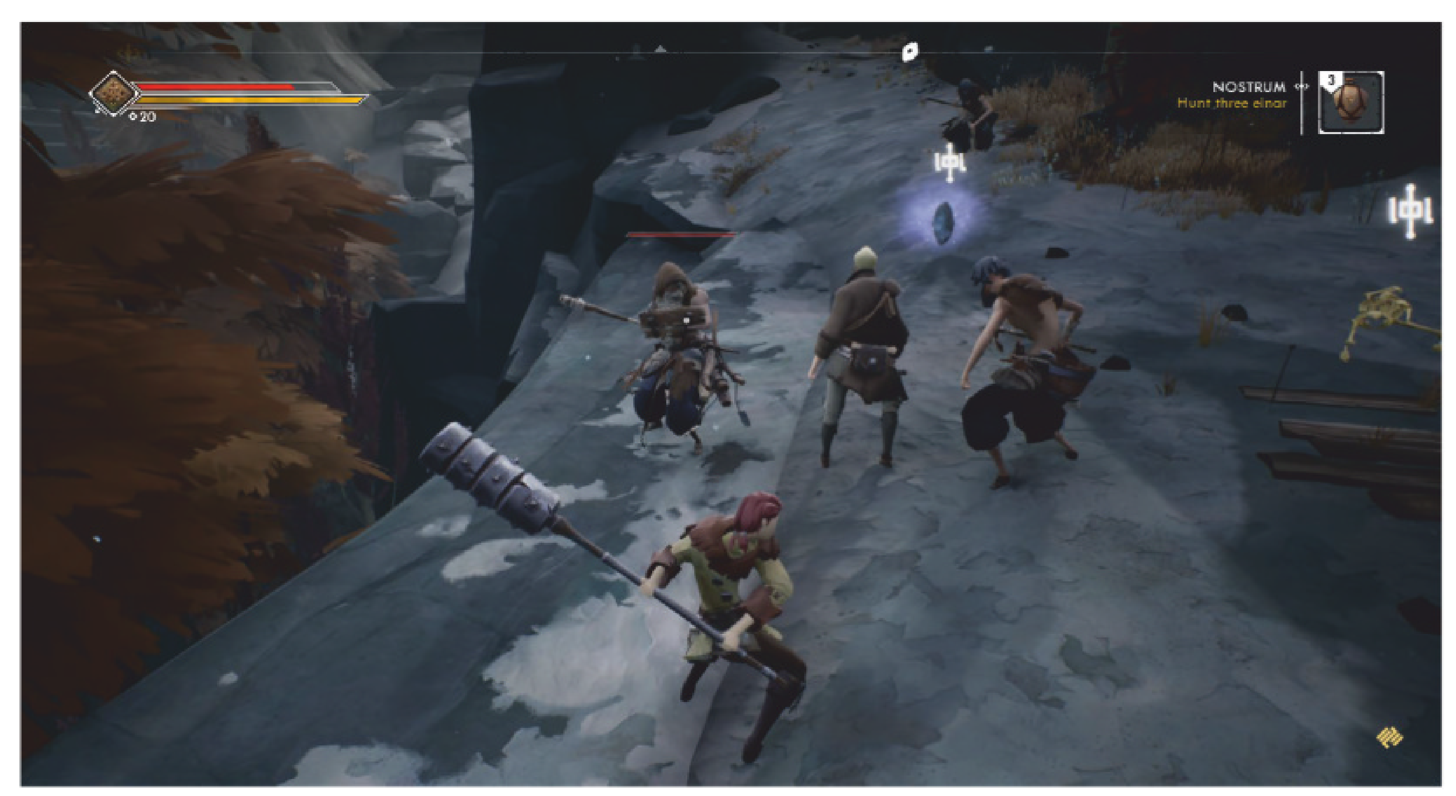
6



ABOVE From your handheld lantern to silhouette monsters, *Ashen* does a great job of playing with light and dark, and nowhere more than in its dungeons. You'll find yourself scrutinising every last shadow in the depths







TOP The Listeners, blind giants from the age before humanity's rise, play roughly the same aloof elder role that your common-or-garden elves do in most works of high fantasy. **MAIN** *Ashen* does contain some delightful moments of spectacle and surprise, especially at the introduction of fast travel, and the reveal of how you're actually getting from place to place. **LEFT** There is a certain elegance to one-on-one fights, as you circle each other, dodging and blocking – but this quickly gets lost when multiple combatants enter the fray



Your first companion is Jokell, a rather dapper, swashbuckling type with a moustache to match. Despite having no mouth to speak of (or from) he is somehow constantly smoking a pipe

Post Script

Company's all well and good, but sometimes you just want to be alone

Early on in *Ashen*, you've given a piece of wisdom by Bataran, the big (mostly) friendly giant who provides your induction to the world: "To walk alone in the darkness is to walk in the company of death." And lo, there was co-op.

At the outset, your AI partner picks up the role of guide from Bataran. This is how a fight tends to go, they implicitly say, and this is a good time to chug from your Gourd. Eventually, though, they hand over to a real human player, who generally has less interest in helping you learn anything. There's no voice chat, or any way of communicating beyond a single 'beckon' command – which, together with the choice never to announce when your game connects with another, recalls *Journey*'s enigmatic approach to co-op. And because they appear in the guise of your current NPC partner, you're left to deduce whether the person stood by your side is sitting in a distant room merely by recognising human behaviour in all its erratic glory.

They might start sprinting ahead, or smashing every pot in sight or, if they are (for example) playing the game in order to review it, inexplicably jumping all the time as they wrestle with Xbox One's terrible screenshot function. There have been reports of players abandoning one another to pursue their own goals, but this was rarely our experience, and *Ashen* does everything it can to discourage this behaviour. There are spots you can climb to only when a companion gives you a leg-up, and dungeon doors that require two pairs of hands to open. Perhaps most importantly, sticking with your partner gives you a second chance at life, as death in combat causes you to fall to your knees, all nearby enemies politely leaving you alone as you await revival.

It's a well-implemented system. In particular, combat is much more enjoyable with a human partner. Where NPCs can discourage you from engaging in fights, the rhythm of *Ashen*'s combat starts to make more sense when you're working together with a fellow player. You land a hit, step back while your stamina bar recharges, letting them get in a few blows, then rinse and repeat.

Co-op is, it's worth noting, optional. The multiplayer menu offers a filter setting, which can be used to ensure you're only partnered with friends who have input the same code – or you can just turn it off altogether. You can choose to only play with AI companions, or none at all. Those two-person dungeon doors can be circumvented by slotting a specific item into your inventory of skills.

This decision feels telling. The companion system is the furthest *Ashen* ever strays from the blueprint laid out by *Dark Souls*, and the option to simply lift the feature out suggests a lack of confidence in it. It's an indication that Aurora44 can see how its implementation of cooperative play struggles to mesh with the concepts it's borrowing.

It's more intangible than the mechanics or level design, but one of the key things that most Soulslikes have in common is a sense of being utterly alone in a hostile world. Even the games that have tested the elastic limit of the formula much further than *Ashen*, such as *Hollow Knight*, which splices it with a 2D Metroidvania, retain this essential solitude. In *Ashen*, this isn't the case. The presence of a partner affects the difficulty level, yes, but it also erodes the other things which make *Souls* games seem harder than they perhaps are – feeling lost, overwhelmed, intimidated by the unknown.

When you encounter a player in those games, whether they are summoned friend or unwanted foe, it's impactful because of the contrast. The same is true of *Journey*'s fellow traveller. When you're constantly chaperoned, though, those moments of human connection aren't rare, or precious, or even especially meaningful. Walking alone in the darkness, in the company of death, is rather the point of these games, and a huge part of their allure. ■

Darksiders III

Hidetaka Miyazaki has a lot to answer for. Sure, he wasn't to know his games would inspire a slew of poor imitators, but we're beginning to tire of playing modern action games that pilfer *Dark Souls*' square pegs and strain to push them into round holes. *Darksiders III* is, in places, a brazen offender. It's most apparent in the way returning merchant Vulgrim has essentially been repurposed as a *Souls* bonfire in demon form. You'll return to him when you die, minus the souls you'd previously gathered (which must, of course, be retrieved from where you fell). And it's there, too, in the way the game arbitrarily withholds information – before revealing all during tips that pop up on the (lengthy) loading screens. These include such pearls of wisdom as 'Time your dodge to avoid damage.' Thanks, *Darksiders III*, we'd never have guessed.

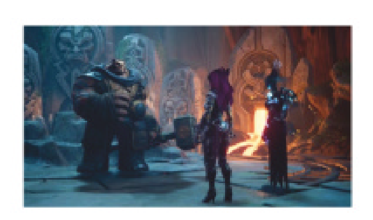
Doing her best to avoid damage is Fury, the third (and least male) of the Four Horsemen. After a short preamble, she's forced, much to her chagrin, to find and defeat the physical manifestations of the Seven Deadly Sins. They've apparently been causing havoc on Earth, though there's little evidence of that since they're usually just waiting for you in a large arena at the end of a long stretch of smaller enemies and sub-bosses. She's voiced well by *Firewatch*'s Cissy Jones, who delivers every line of dialogue with an eye-roll, a curled-lip sneer or both. And yet you might ask yourself if this is really how she should be characterised: for the most part, Fury merely seems Mildly Exasperated. You'll understand how she feels, since she's accompanied on her quest by a Watcher, a smug chaperone who becomes as bothersome to the player as to Fury herself. But she's hardly the white-hot ball of rage her name would suggest.

In battle, Fury should feel like a force of nature. Yet she's far from unstoppable. In fact, *Darksiders III* does its best to make her feel pitifully weak. She feels slower than Death, less powerful than War, and for someone whose getup and weapon – a long, bladed whip – makes her look like an armoured dominatrix, she isn't really one for punishment. You'll tap out basic square-button whip combos, interspersed with triangle for your secondary weapon, gained after defeating each of the Sins. Doing so builds a Wrath meter, though unleashing this is a double-edged sword – you do appreciably more damage, but the effects that accompany it not only make combat harder to read but tank the framerate. On a standard PS4, triggering Fury's lightning special when surrounded by a group of enemies in one cramped little room can temporarily turn the game into a flipbook.

There are, alas, a lot of cramped little rooms with groups of enemies, which would be less of a problem if the camera were fit for purpose in claustrophobic interiors. It is not. Directional indicators for incoming blows are so small as to be almost entirely pointless, and they only alert you to melee attacks. You can lock onto individual opponents, though it's only worth doing when you've cleared out the rest; dodging at the last second triggers a slo-mo effect reminiscent of *Bayonetta*'s Witch Time, letting you respond with a powerful counter. Yet doing so when surrounded is as likely as not to leave you wide open to the rest of the mob.

Developer Gunfire Games
Publisher THQ Nordic
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

> Enemies are like raised paving slabs: obstacles designed only to trip you up, causing you to mutter under your breath



FURIOUSER AND FURIOUSER
There's a hub area to which you can return via Vulgrim – to call it 'fast travel' would be generous with loading times this long – where a blacksmith will upgrade your weapons using adamantine slivers or fragments you've found. However, it's the various equippable enhancements that make more of a difference. These have their own upgrade paths, unlocked by obtaining angelic or demonic artifacts, and they each confer active and passive bonuses. Damage returned as health is a good start, but there's one that not only lets you regenerate Havoc passively but also gives you a damage boost when health is low. It's a slow process, mind: the time and effort it takes to obtain the necessary trinkets is often better spent simply levelling up.

In the end, the combat is neither here nor there. It lacks the mindless pleasure of a loot-hoovering button-masher, and it's neither precise enough to stand close comparison with the *Souls* games, nor nearly as responsive as, well, *Bayonetta* – or the rest of PlatinumGames' catalogue, for that matter. It does, however, have its moments. Though it takes aeons to trigger, Fury's Havoc mode offers a fleeting cathartic release, as she finally becomes powerful and angry enough to smash smaller enemies to pieces and even tear up sub-bosses, recovering health all the while. And the fights with the Sins are impressively staged, creatively designed – the junk-hoarding Avarice is a standout – and challenging in the right ways.

Otherwise, this all-powerful Nephilim spends a lot of time crawling slowly through vents or waiting for lifts, and she has one of the feeblest double-jumps we've ever seen. A flame ability gives it extra height, at the cost of a long mid-air pause, during which you're vulnerable to projectiles – and you'd better believe there's a section with a group of annoying little gits all too keen to take advantage of that. Yet that's typical of most enemies in *Darksiders III*. They're like raised paving slabs: obstacles designed only to trip you up, causing you to swear or mutter under your breath. When this happens, rather than waste one of your Estus flask equivalents before a genuinely testing encounter, you're often better off deliberately getting yourself killed. Defeating certain enemies will sometimes refill one of them, but there's no guarantee that'll happen, and reaching Vulgrim makes no difference, since he only sells consumables.

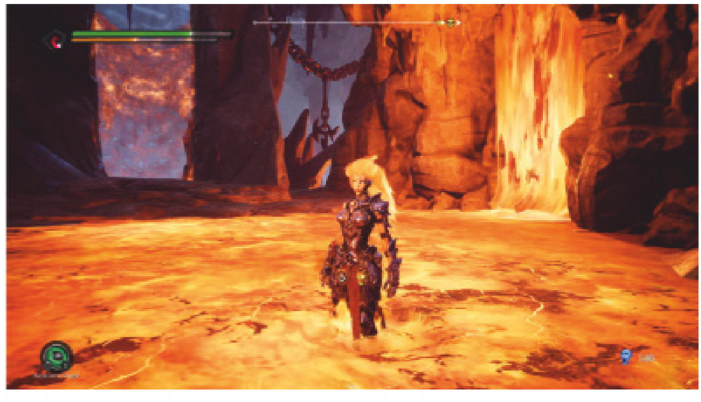
Beyond that you've got puzzles involving pressure plates and switches that only occasionally find the sweet spot between overly familiar and wildly obtuse, with several featuring peculiarly strict timing windows. Navigation is made more awkward by the lack of a map, though the compass at the top of the screen directing you towards the nearest Sin still makes you feel like you're being led by the nose – at least, when it doesn't start behaving erratically. Some of these complaints might seem picky, but collectively they turn the game into a slog. If the idea was to get you into Fury's angry mindset, then job done – though in truth you more often feel like one of her lesser-known cousins, Boredom or Irritation. From heavy-metal *Zelda* to diet *Souls*, it's been quite the decline. By the end, you'll want the fourth Horseman to show up, if only to get this whole apocalypse business over and done with.

4

RIGHT The script relies too often on jokes that poke fun at the game's own failings. "You take me to all the best places," moans Fury, as if to excuse another visit to a gloomy, uninspiring underground area. BELOW If the world is barely recognisable as our own, it looks rather nice in places – when it's not moving, at any rate. Alongside the framerate drops are frequent freezes of several seconds when the game is loading in new areas. At least it tends to happen when you're well away from enemies. MAIN Havoc mode only works on bosses up to a point, and it's wasted on the rank and file – but it does let you take down larger opponents with little hassle. It's about the only time you're really allowed to cut loose, mind you







ABOVE As well as the weapons she gains from beating the Sins, Fury earns new abilities that allow her to explore further – burning webbing or using lightning to ride tornadoes – though none are used particularly creatively



Gris

Nomada Studio's debut is absolutely in love with itself. It's quintessential indie bait – a wordless, emotive story draped in soft, stunning visuals. Much of the game involves simply holding left and watching the watercolour world go by. As the tale unfolds, the background turns from a drab monochrome wasteland into a prismatic paradise filled with colour. Platforming is light and airy, and the puzzles more concerned with telling a story than setting a challenge. We're even given an adorable forest sprite pet in the second level, for heavens' sake. This is a game that knows its audience.

And that's meant entirely as a compliment. *Gris*' sense of its own self is striking, even if the means by which it strings it all together are often nothing revelatory. The visual style, naturally, has much to do with it. Artist Conrad Roset has achieved something special here, a spellbinding feat of interactive poetry and portraiture that – combined with lavish animation and sound design – makes for what must surely be one of the most beautiful games ever made.

The heroine's dress, which gradually gains a variety of helpful abilities as you go, appears almost as a living thing. It flows behind her as she runs, flips playfully like a leaping dolphin or cresting wave on an about-turn, or unfurls itself into insect-like wings as you use your newfound float ability to clear a gap. The setting feels strangely familiar by now: the internal self presented as a kind of shattered wonderland, the pieces of which a manifestation of our heroine must walk on her path out of trauma. But what could have been an overly indulgent, maudlin representation of a troubled psyche is instead inked with all the shifting colour it deserves.

The first area is almost unrelentingly oppressive, however, a desert the colour of dried blood and past pain. And it's a troubling start: we've made no secret of our aversion to strong winds in videogames, and *Gris* reaches straight for the tritest – and most irritating – metaphor for internal struggle. But it also hands you a solution without too much delay: you're quickly able to transform your dress into a weighty cube around the heroine, which allows her to shuffle on regardless when a storm blows in. The faintly humorous sight of a cube grimly waddling onwards through adversity is unexpected enough that you'll find yourself mollified – and later, the ability is repurposed in several creative ways, as you drop from heights to smash through breakable floors or prop up mechanisms.

Alongside a few surprises in other levels involving flash-frozen clones and magical lighting, playing as a pretty-headed cube is one of *Gris*' few moments of mechanical whimsy and originality. Otherwise, it frequently cribs from other indie titles without adding much of value. Sliding down slopes through desert ruins early on is a basic homage to *Journey*, the long stretches minimally interactive and thus not half as expressive. Hopping across Cubist topiary starts out with a distinct air of *Monument Valley 2* and swiftly becomes *Super Mario*'s jump-sensitive floors. Later, there are the inevitable sections in which gravity is reversed. By the time we're singing to make flowers bloom, our eyes have just about rolled into an alternate realm. Sensibly, though, *Gris* never lingers too long on a single mechanic, rote or riveting as it may be. And for a game without dialogue that is rendered in such an abtruse manner, everything is taught with patience and grace: the art style is never counter to clarity and so frustrations are rare.

Happily, too, the painted world takes on more nuanced tones as it blooms, Roset deftly layering colour upon colour. A verdant forest is filled with the promise of growth and new life, little creatures chattering among the leaves – but its energy also gives rise to a dangerous new facet of the self. And even though the expanse of blue you're plunged into afterwards is seemingly never-ending, under the cerulean stratum of caverns and oceans and ice still glow the hues of previous levels, past experiences.

If there's a prettier visual representation of depression in a videogame, it's difficult to recall. The blue level is a suffocating, ever-changing dive in the silent dark. You adapt, and survive. Sometimes you even feel at home in there, leaping from water to air and back again effortlessly as your abilities begin to flow together elegantly. But things lapse into cliché once again when your black dog – or bird, or eel – turns up to chase you in a largely toothless set-piece. It's at these points where one starts to see through the pretty but thin veneer of watercolour: when even the enemy is gorgeous, there's a worrying sense that we're only seeing the Instagrammable side of sadness here.

Still, we can't deny the genuine nausea at the sudden reminder that we haven't fully escaped the clutches of darkness, nor the bittersweet, familiar sensation of seeing that blue tinge the remainder of the game. Yes, the ghost of a tear appears when a part of ourselves we'd just put so much work into piecing together turns up to defend us. And the ending lands, its message cementing *Gris* as part of a new wave of games talking to a generation so disillusioned that illusion has become a viable way out, where being self-absorbed is the first step towards practising the same compassionate gaze on the world outside.

Interminable at times, obviously. But – however begrudgingly – you have to admit it's got a point. Calling *Gris*' well-worn touchstones mere cliché seems unfair: 'cliché' implies they've lost all resonance, and that isn't true here. Yes, perhaps *Gris* is a little bit in love with itself. Maybe we should take the hint.

7

Developer Nomada Studio
Publisher Devolver Digital
Format PC (tested), Switch
Release Out now

There's a worrying sense we're only seeing the Instagrammable side of sadness

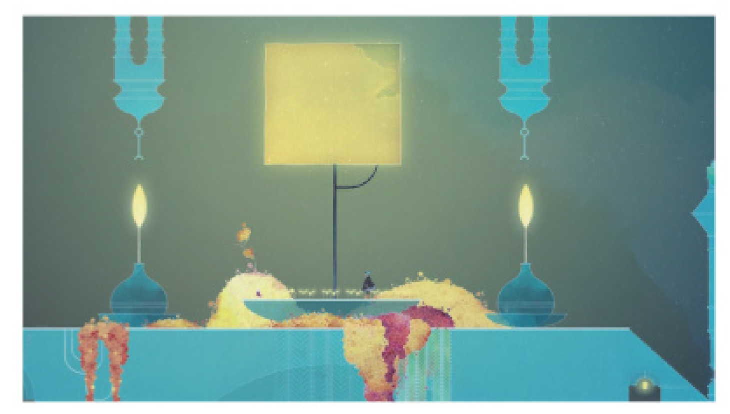


SIRIUS BUSINESS
Constellations are a big theme in *Gris*: while the usual implications of fate and chance don't appear to fit the story here, we suppose this wouldn't be millennial catnip without somebody slapping galaxy print all over it. Your rewards for completing platforming puzzles are tiny, sparkling stars: collect enough, and you'll unlock the next section of the game, form new paths and, subsequently, a way out of the melancholic mind palace. While the platforming required for game completion is fairly basic, there are a number of optional collectibles that require ever so slightly more dexterity to grab. They have seemingly no effect on anything in the game – we can't even see how many we've collected – but they help add challenge without forcing it.



ABOVE The particular cause of the heroine's trauma isn't made explicit, leaving your mind free to dissect itself in its own vindictive little way. We're fine, honestly. **LEFT** The singing mechanic is introduced very late in the game. Probably for the best, as it's not the freshest concept – but when the conclusion is so reliant on it, the pacing feels a little off

BELOW Jump-sensitive platforms are more about showing off the wonderful ripple of animation as the foliage appears and disappears than offering a serious test of skill



ABOVE Instead of each level simply having its own thematic colour, *Gris* becomes an enchanting emotional pastiche as it develops, with colours bleeding into each other – and the blues making the yellows shine brighter



Mutant Year Zero: Road To Eden

Developer The Bearded Ladies
Publisher Funcom
Format PC (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

At first, it seems a simple rule. During your turn, your character can either move and take an action, or sprint to cover more ground and take no action. Since it was popularised in 2013's *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*, it's been fascinating to see how that rule has introduced a new sense of dynamism to a genre in which games can easily feel staid. Just look at the diversity of games in which it's featured, from 2D platforming tactics in *SteamWorld Heist* to *BattleTech*, where it's a natural partner to a strategy setting.

The latest take on the act-or-leg-it format is *Mutant Year Zero: Road To Eden*, which strikes a distinctive profile, what with its lead characters being an anthropomorphic pig and duck. The pig is Bormin, the gruff de facto leader of your troupe of Stalkers, and Dux is, well, a duck. He's a cocky upstart, all beak and no respect. They live in the safety of the Ark, outside of which lies the Zone, a tract of Sweden which, following global warming, plague and a nuclear war, is infested by raiders, robots and mutated dogs. As Stalkers, it's their job to go out there to find supplies for the city, and now, following the disappearance of a member of the Ark's community, it's up to them to find him.

To any *STALKER* player, this setting will seem familiar, and *Beyond Good & Evil* fans might have their eyebrows raised at its character design, but this game's inspirations lie in Mutant, a pen-and-paper RPG which was first published in 1984 and was updated in 2014 as Mutant Year Zero. The depth of its source material lends the game a strong tone, which swings between the gallows humour voiced by your characters, comic-book violence, and poignant detail built into a world scattered with sprawling skeletons, overgrown huts and roads choked with moss-covered camper vans.

It's a world worth exploring, and rather surprisingly for a turn-based tactics game, that's exactly what you get to do. While most tactics games are set in discrete arenas that are generated or custom-designed simply for combat, *Mutant Year Zero* takes place in linked, open levels. Moving through the world in realtime, finding scrap and weapon parts to buy items and upgrade your weapons, lends the world a coherence that's usually missing in the genre, and gives you a fine sense of embarking on a journey.

As you work through each area toward your next quest marker, you'll encounter enemies, such as Ghouls, the raiders who live in the ruins, mutated Zone dogs, and robots. They're all bad, of course; they'll attack, initiating combat as soon as they detect you, taking the first turn. Unless, that is, you sneak by them, crouching so you reduce the size of their radius of awareness, or if you initiate combat so that you take the first turn.

Stealth is *Mutant Year Zero*'s key twist on the genre. You can use it to skirt around many encounters, though you'll miss out on valuable XP to buy new abilities and chests that contain new armour and weapons. You might also miss Artifacts, objects from the old world such as iPods and Commodore 64s which you can cash in for party-wide boosts. More importantly, you use stealth to start fights on your terms. The game's tooltips are keen to advise you to pick off lone enemies, stealth-killing them with Dux's crossbow and Selma's silenced pistol, before they get to take their turn and call for backup. In the early game, thinning the opposition to even the odds for your party of three is a necessary tactic, but by the mid-game it becomes untenable, your silent weapons dealing too little damage to higher-level enemies. It also becomes tedious to begin every encounter by trying to pare down stragglers.

In the early game, thinning the opposition to even the odds for your party of three is a necessary tactic

A more rewarding way to use stealth is to move your characters into positions that suit their strengths before springing the trap. Dux has a passive skill that doubles his critical chance when he has a height advantage, so give him a long-range rifle and put him on the top of a climbing frame or in an upper window. Magnus can control enemies' minds for a turn, giving breathing room and an extra gun on your side, so position him close to a Shaman, so he can possess it and stop it from summoning extra enemies. Bormin is best in front, taking the brunt of enemy attention, his Stone Skin ability allowing him to shrug off all damage for a turn and his Spore Cloud surrounding him in concealing smoke if he gets hit.

The five characters you'll eventually choose between for your party have many skills to explore, but you'd also better be upgrading your weapons, raising their damage output and critical chance rate, while finding and equipping the right gear, including weapon addons which can give a chance of setting organic targets on fire or EMP-stunning robots. Strategising effective loadouts of skills and equipment is engrossing, but you'll find yourself having to fast-travel back to the Ark to refit your addons at the weapon shop, based on the balance of enemies ahead. After all, by the second half of the game the real challenge comes in raising your damage output to keep up with the way the game, rather disappointingly, tends to raise enemy difficulty by increasing the size of its health bars.

Also underdeveloped is *Mutant Year Zero*'s abrupt ending. Since enemies don't respawn, you probably won't have had the opportunity to explore all your characters' abilities by the point the story reaches its conclusion, and there's no endgame in which to enjoy your achievements. It's a wrench to have to say goodbye to your mutants, not only because you've been through so much together but also because other tactics games are more open-ended. While it lasts, *Mutant Year Zero* presents a fresh and involving take on the genre, but its linearity isn't quite such an ideal fit.

8



CERTAIN DEATH
One of *Mutant Year Zero*'s best features is its UI. It's not pretty, but developer The Bearded Ladies clearly knows that a satisfying tactics game is one in which your decisions are based on good information. You always know the hit and critical chances from firing from any given location, what damage you'll deal, which enemies it has line-of-sight with, and whether you'll break your character's stealth if you go there. And while the game's ancestor is *XCOM*, it shares its philosophy for simplified hit chance with *Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle*. Your chances are only 25, 50, 75 and 100 per cent, making every option clear and reducing the frequency of – or at least making more bearable – those moments when you miss an apparently point-blank shot.

ABOVE The Zone is richly presented, filled with remnants of the old world which act as fine cover. **LEFT** Bormin and Dux are well-voiced, their relationship turning from mutual disdain to a firm, comradely bond by the end



BELOW Dux's Moth Wings ability allows him to fly up into the air for the duration of his shot, giving him a much better hit chance



ABOVE An Iron Man difficulty mode adds permadeath if you don't revive your bleeding-out characters soon enough, and prevents mid-combat saves



Desert Child

Remarkable though it is when one person makes a game all by themselves, every so often we're reminded of the benefits a larger team can bring. Differences of opinion prompt compromise and, often, improvement. *Desert Child* is one such game. Oscar Brittain has dreamed up and pulled off this hoverbike adventure alone. He's come up with an intriguing world, rendered it in wonderful pixel art, has written the code that holds it all together and appears to have composed almost all of the soundtrack, albeit under a number of aliases. It is a confident work with a wonderful sense of style. Unfortunately, it's not much of a game.

The core mechanic is pleasing enough initially. *Desert Child* is built on a series of two-minute hoverbike races set to pulsing faux-'80s electro. It's notionally a 1v1 racing game in which you can fire bullets at or ram your opponent to slow them down, or use a recharging boost to zip past them. Along the way, floating TV screens can be shot down to reveal cash, boosted into to top up your ammo, or simply ignored in the hope of letting them cause problems for your opponent.

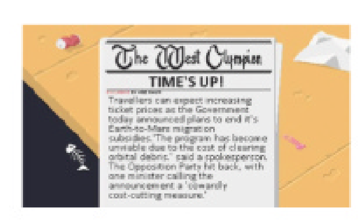
Brittain finds plenty of ways to riff on this formula. You hunt down bounties for the cops, the aim being to destroy your opponent's bike rather than beat them over the line, the payout larger the more quickly you get the kill. An apprentice wants to run with you to improve their skills, and will pay for the privilege. You herd kangaroos, trying to keep behind the pack to avoid losing any stragglers. You deliver pizza. And down an alley in the nightlife district, a mobster wants you to throw a race, hack the local bank, or disrupt races by side-ramming vehicles. If that seems like a lot to do, well, we're sorry for misleading you. These are minor mechanical deviations on a single idea whose central premise is neither strong not satisfying enough to carry a whole game. There's little else to do that isn't in service of a core mechanic that quickly loses its lustre.

It's something that's made clear within the first half-hour. You start in a small town on a dying Earth, and are told to raise a few hundred dollars so you can get your backside to Mars. It's easily done, and you quickly find yourself on the red planet, wandering an attractive seaside town. It's bigger than the one you've left behind, but there still isn't much there. You start to piece the town, a stitched-up series of single-screen streets, together in your mind; the protagonist moves at a trudge, so it'll take longer than you'd like, but you'll get there eventually. You'll win a few races, netting a couple of hundred dollars at a time. You'll bring down a few bounties, maybe throw a race or two. They all bring in about the same amount of cash. From the minute you land on Mars, you have only one goal: raise the entry fee for the hoverbike grand prix. All $10,000 of it.

That's a lot of races, and you'll need to win even more of them because just about every other system in

Developer Oscar Brittain
Publisher Akupara Games
Format PC, PS4, Switch (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

Just about every system in the game is designed to slow your progress to your lofty financial goal



JUST DESERTS
The story shares its biggest problem with the game as a whole: it's an intriguing setup that doesn't really go anywhere. Earth is dying, and thanks to government subsidies, most of its inhabitants have upped sticks to Mars. The subsidy scheme is about to end, prompting you to hurriedly raise the cash to get there yourself. Twenty minutes later, you've arrived, and if there's a story to be told here about what the human race does when faced with a new, unscarred home planet, Brittain has no interest in exploring it. And to add insult to injury, typos are frequent. We'll take our chances on Earth, thanks.

the game is designed to slow your progress to that lofty financial goal. Between races you need to keep tabs on your hunger level, since it affects your performance on the bike. Prices aren't kind, with one restaurant offering pizza and wine for $80 and even ramen dishes setting you back $15 for a meagre reduction of your hunger stat. Your hoverbike will need repairs, courtesy of vendors charging infuriating prices: $45 for a 20 per cent fix, or $100 for a full one. You'll find out the hard way that the local law are keeping an eye on you; feel a hand on your shoulder and fail the ensuing chase, and you'll be fined thousands. A bank across the harbour will keep your cash safe, giving you yet another reason to criss-cross the town at a snail's pace between races and odd jobs.

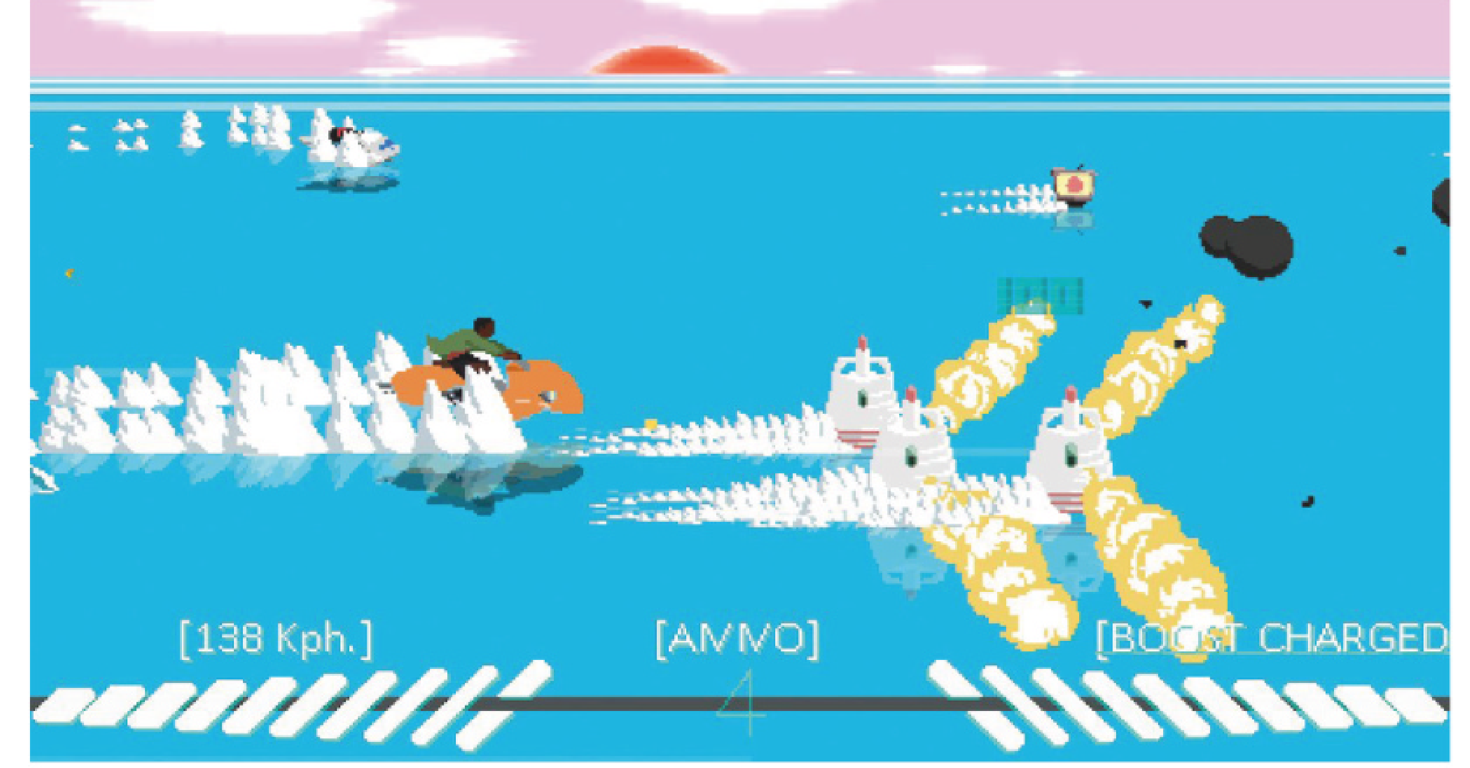
All this pain can be offset, somewhat, through bike upgrades, which despite being unfathomably poorly explained and clunkily implemented is one of *Desert Child*'s more successful elements. Bike parts can be stolen, via a hacking minigame, from other bikes around town, or bought at chop shops for what initially seems like an eye-watering $600 apiece, though they're worthwhile, if not quite essential, investments.

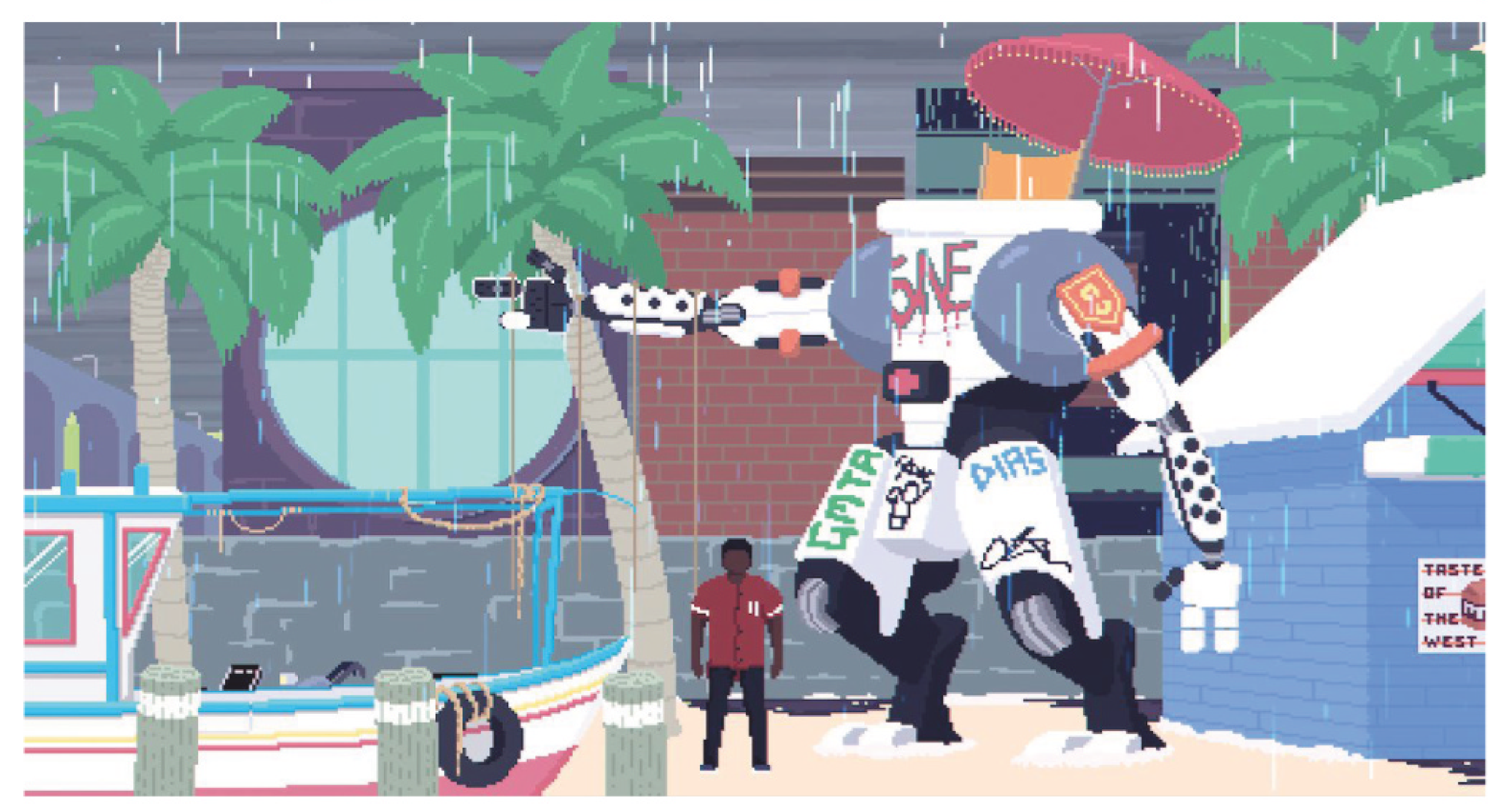
You apply these upgrades using a puzzle system that owes a debt to *Resident Evil 4*'s suitcase inventory: not only must you find a way to make these awkwardly shaped doodads fit in the puzzle space, but all must be connectable to a central battery using power cells. You'll cram as many power cells in to the remaining gaps as you can, and then, in a different menu, assign them to the upgrades you've installed to increase their power. Your bullets get bigger, your ammo capacity too; TV screens spit out more dosh when shot, or give more ammo when rammed. The whole thing is powered by baffling menu screens, sadly, and you're only ever one errant button press or stick flick from resetting the whole thing. Once you get your head round it, though, it's the most satisfying part of the game.

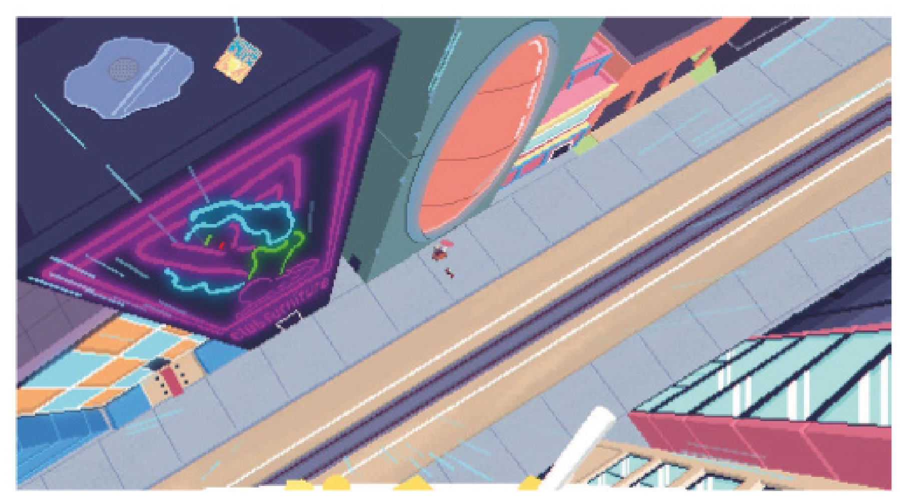
It's all rather moot, however. Yes, you can hurry things along a bit as you work towards that $10,000 goal. But every task in this part of the game can be completed without a single upgrade in place. Races employ ludicrous levels of rubberbanding: boost ahead and your opponent will be right on your tail, but take it slow and they'll do the same. Only once we've finally saved up the grand prix entry fee do the upgrades start to feel necessary. Suddenly the game starts to expand and deepen, its systems starting to make sense, and races paying out in the tens of thousands, atoning for the miserly early grind. And then, within minutes, it's over, the credits suddenly rolling out of nowhere. It's an abrupt, jarring ending – as if Brittain got bored, and decided to draw a line under it. Fair enough: we also tired too soon of a game that, while dripping in style, is miserably lacking in substance.

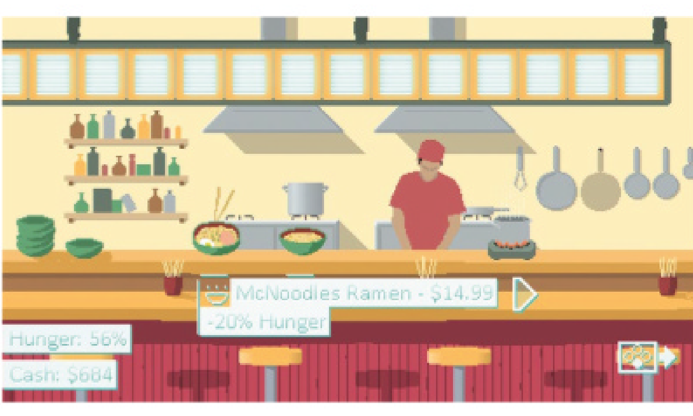
4

RIGHT Maddeningly, you're not told when the finish line is approaching; you'll lose races due to being unable to boost the final stretch. A bike upgrade fixes it, but there's no knowing when you'll get it – parts are unlocked at random. MAIN On certain days, there's a fellow in that giant robot who lets you test out an all-powerful laser with recharging ammo. BOTTOM Environments are certainly handsome, but contain little to do, and are ultimately little more than interactive loading screens of which you will quickly grow tired









ABOVE Food is irritatingly costly, though in fairness ingredients probably aren't that easy to come by on Mars. Thankfully a beachside vendor sells a week-old cinnamon bun for a pittance that reduces hunger by a quarter

Beat Saber

At this point in virtual reality's development, it's still rare to encounter a game that feels native to the technology. *Beat Saber* is an exception – it feels like it was created by examining the tools available and building from there, rather than jamming an existing genre into VR. True, the colourful blocks zooming towards the player in time with a soundtrack might mean that at first glance *Beat Saber* resembles *Guitar Hero* or another rhythm game. But it's fundamentally reshaped by the way you interact with it.

What is the most satisfying and natural thing you can do with a motion controller? Hyperbolic Magnetism has correctly concluded that the answer is 'slice objects in half'. It's like being handed the cardboard tube from inside a wrapping-paper roll: you instantly become a child again, wielding what is now your sword or, perhaps more fittingly, lightsaber.

Each block has to be sliced in a particular direction, and incoming obstacles have to be dodged or ducked under. The result, as you bounce on your toes, alternating between delicate slashes and two-handed pounding, feels like a mix of dancing, drumming and swordplay. There's one lovely design touch that captures the sheer joy of interaction in *Beat Saber*: hold the two beams together, and they'll push back against each other, the controllers buzzing in your hands.

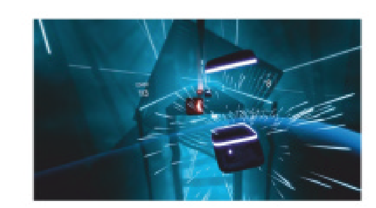
Combined with the kind of abstracted visuals that VR does best – less danger of bumping up against the walls of the uncanny valley – and the synaesthetic deployment of music, it's an experience perfectly crafted for the immersion tank environment of a VR headset. Not least because you can't see your own arms flailing around, which would rather puncture the illusion that you're moving with samurai-like elegance.

When it comes to the music, most of which wouldn't feel out of place in a mid-'00s Pendulum festival set, your mileage may vary. Whether or not it's to your taste, however, is largely unimportant. In terms of how you're interacting with them, and the way they're structured, these aren't really songs. They're levels to explore, defining the space and rhythm you'll be playing within. They're opponents, which can be pushed up or down in difficulty depending on your mood or proficiency.

Beat Saber never reaches the same transcendental moments of synaesthesia as *Tetris Effect*, but it does make you feel like a genuine participant in the music. That encourages performative play, even though there's no score incentive. Whether it's tapping a toe, swinging your hips, or thrusting with your sword like you're in a Tron-reskinned version of The Princess Bride, it's impossible to play *Beat Saber* without a flourish.

8

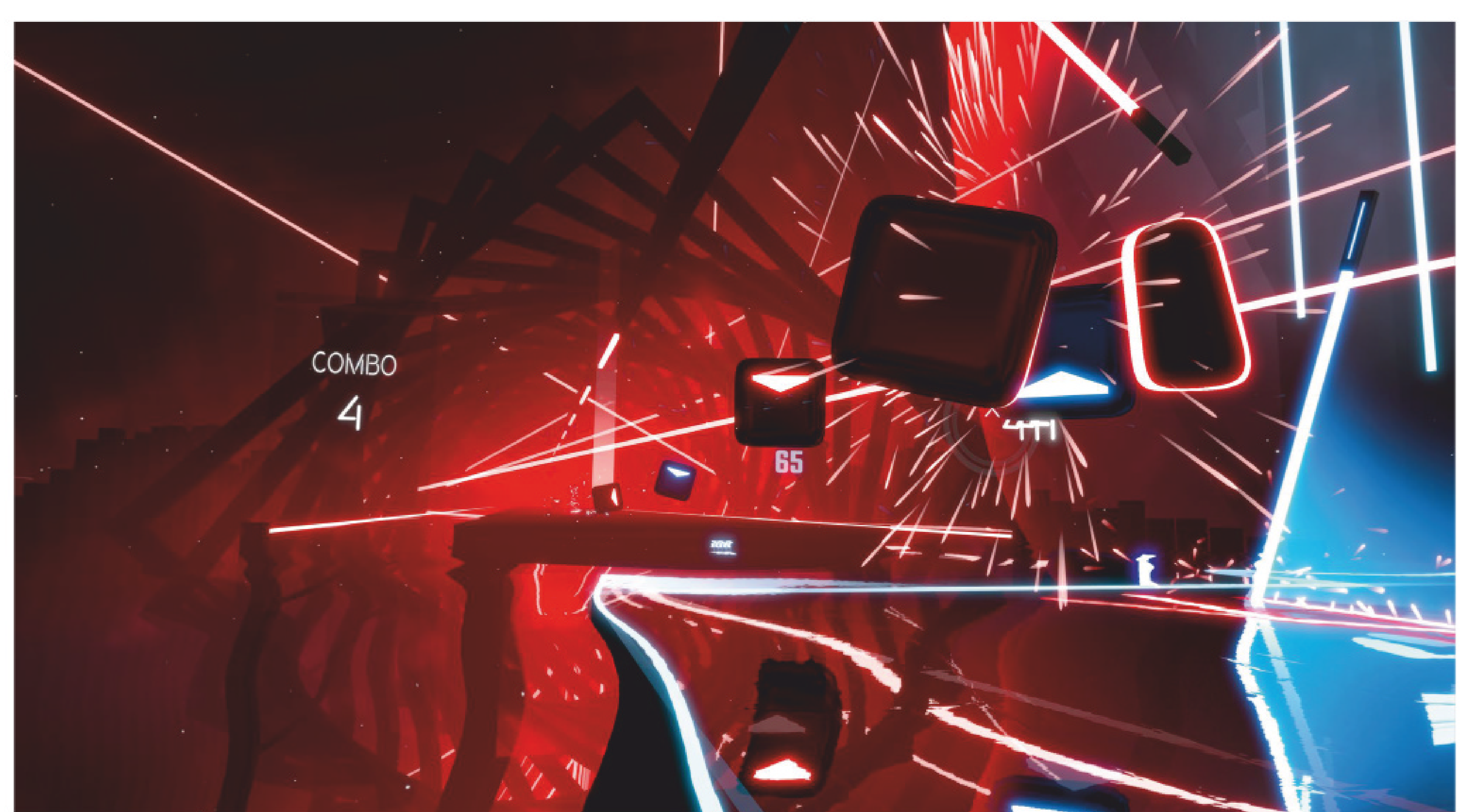
Developer Hyperbolic Magnetism
Publisher Beat Games
Format PSVR (tested), Rift, Vive
Release Out now



FINE TUNING

The game is surprisingly flexible in letting you choose how to play it – without the obstacles, so you can play sitting down, or one-handed, though only with a limited number of tracks on the hardest setting. Tracks can be sped up or slowed down, albeit with some rather cacophonous results. You can follow a loose campaign, which introduces each song and variant in turn, or compete for high scores on a chosen track in the multiplayer Party Mode.

Beat Saber's busier tracks can produce a genuine workout, but also result in injuries – we may have punched a door handle while playing, and given ourselves minor whiplash thanks to the added weight of the headset



The Haunted Island, A Frog Detective Game

At 49 minutes – including a very late contender for 2018's best credits sequence, not to mention a sequel-teasing epilogue – Grace Bruxner's lo-fi firstperson adventure is the shortest game we've reviewed in quite some time. And if it weren't for Amanita Design's (comparatively fulsome) *Chuchel*, it would be in with a strong shout for the funniest. An early dialogue exchange lets you know exactly what you're in for. "Who should I talk to first?" our amphibious hero demands. "You're talking to me already!" comes the reply. "Okay," the frog shoots back. "Who should I talk to second?" If that raised a smile, then you'll likely be royally entertained for the other 48 and a half minutes.

The story begins with a phone call from your supervisor, who promises to put his best investigator on the titular case – but since Lobster Cop isn't available, you'll have to do. With magnifying glass in hand, you set off for a charming little tropical haven, where a sloth named Martin has been having sleepless nights thanks to a series of ghostly sounds coming from a nearby cave. With a hired team of ghost scientists unable to resolve the mystery, it's up to you to do what they couldn't. Though there's not much real detective work involved; rather, you'll engage in some amusingly daft conversations with the game's anthropomorphic cast to prompt a series of fetch quests. Their requests are pretty weird – a nod, perhaps, to the genre's classics and their incongruous puzzles – but your ultimate aim is to gather the right items to make dynamite in order to blow up the rubble covering the cave entrance. These include a ball of wool and a plate of pasta – "So, the normal explosive ingredients, then," the frog muses.

And that, to all extents and purposes, is your lot. You have a magnifying glass, which you can hold up to zoom in on objects and people with the right mouse button, but it serves no broader purpose beyond warping the image and making the simple characters look slightly sillier. But then to complicate matters any further would detract from the game's main purpose as a delivery device for gently surreal humour. Its hit rate is unusually strong. There's a delightful extended riff on the factual accuracy (or otherwise) of books compared to the internet, while the rudimentary art and basic animation make some lines all the funnier: the deadpan expressions are a punchline in and of themselves. Its rough edges extend to the odd typo and one or two areas look unfinished, but this endearingly scrappy effort could teach bigger games a thing or two about the value of good writing.

7

Developer Grace Bruxner, Thomas Bowker
Publisher Grace Bruxner
Format PC
Release Out now



COUP DE GRACE
Bruxner, who makes a brief cameo appearance here, is based in Melbourne, and has been making shortform games for some time: the likes of *The Fish Market* and *Alien Caseno* can be downloaded from Itch.io if *The Haunted Island* leaves you keen to discover her other work. It's not entirely clear whether a post-credits tease – "The detective will return in The Case Of The Invisible Wizard" – is one final gag, or if a sequel really is in the works.

Those accustomed to the moral dilemmas of modern adventure games will be pleased to learn that you're given a decision to make at the end. We daren't reveal what that is, but we agonised over it for a few seconds





Halo: Reach

How Bungie went back to the beginning for its Halo swansong

By Alex Spencer

Developer Bungie **Publisher** Microsoft Game Studios **Format** 360 **Release** 2010

How do you say goodbye to the series that defined your studio, and helped launch and sustain an entire console platform, after nearly a decade? If you're Bungie, on the cusp of leaving Microsoft to embrace its own *Destiny*, you go back to the beginning – 2001's *Halo: Combat Evolved* – and then back further still.

The developer's final *Halo* game abandons the ongoing storyline of Master Chief, last of the armoured super-soldiers known as Spartans. Instead, it opts for a prequel set, Rogue One-style, in the moments immediately before the first game.

Human colonists living on the eponymous planet of Reach make first contact with the Covenant alien forces. They do not come in peace. Noble Team, a squad of Spartans, is deployed to fight back. It is, ultimately, a doomed mission. The game makes no secret of this, opening on a shot of a Spartan's helmet – neatly colour-coded to match your own customisable character – abandoned in the dust, its visor terminally cracked. Just like Rogue One, the story's one of a small group of soldiers who give their lives to set the events of the main saga in motion.

And it's not just *Reach*'s story which winds back the clock. The prequel setting allowed Bungie to erase some of the factors that had complicated the games since *Combat Evolved*. Gone are the zombie-like Flood and floating Sentinels, enemies that upset the delicate balance of *Halo*'s gunplay. The dual-wielding of sidearms introduced by the second game, and the incendiary and spike grenades added in the third, are also dropped. It's a streamlining of the formula, refocusing around the core 'golden triangle' design. This is how Bungie refers to *Halo* combat's mix of shooting, grenades and melee attacks – all interlinked in a twitch-reflex game of rock, paper, scissors.

The result plays as a kind of greatest-hits package. There are Bungie's trademark painterly science-fiction landscapes; the unmistakable heft of steering a Warthog; Martin O'Donnell's unique mix of orchestral sweeps and guitar stabs; the day-glo purple shards of a Needler seeking out their target; and the developer's continuing love affair with the voice of Nathan Fillion.

There's a pleasing familiarity, too, to *Reach*'s toybox: to knowing, for example, that the squat bumblebee chassis of a Ghost hoverbike conceals an explosive fuel tank just behind its left fin, or that a fully charged plasma pistol shot will short out an opponent's shielding.

On top of these well-established fundaments, Bungie builds afresh. *Reach*'s biggest addition, Armor Abilities, takes that sacred triangle and bends it into more of a square by offering game-altering power-ups (comparable to *Destiny*'s cooldown skills) that allow individuals to customise their playstyle, even more than with the weapons they choose. Drop Shield puts up a healing bubble that blocks projectile attacks. Hologram generates a decoy version of your character. And Jet Pack... well, it's a jet pack. Each ability opens up new approaches to combat. The holographic decoy, for example, is a great way to draw a sniper's fire and set up a sneak attack, to smoke out opponents from cover, or just to baffle and annoy your friends.

Multiplayer offers these Abilities as part of pre-packaged loadouts – the influence, no doubt, of *Call Of Duty*-style military shooters, a genre beginning its ascendancy just as *Reach* was being developed. In the campaign, meanwhile, they're scattered throughout each level like old-school power-ups, their use reinforced by the Spartans who fight alongside you.

Noble Team isn't made up of characters so much as it is assorted combinations of accents, trademark weapons and abilities. The assault specialist who shields herself as she runs headlong into combat; the lean-figured sniper in the dusky scout armour, activating camouflage while he methodically sets up the next shot; and you, the customisable Noble Six, able to switch fighting styles on the fly depending on what you find along the way.

Such a major change feels like it should imbalance that carefully honed triangle of combat. But the Abilities actually slot very neatly into the interplay between the tools *Halo* hands its players. Take Armor Lock, which amplifies your shield to make you ▶

invulnerable, but immobile – a complete change to the usual attack-retreat rhythm of *Halo* gun battles.

Vitally, though, it interacts with many of the existing combat systems in interesting ways. Armor Lock offers a rare counter to Needler rounds, shards of ammunition which are fairly ineffectual on impact but burrow deep into unshielded armour. Activating the ability immediately sloughs them off before they can reach critical mass and explode. It's a similar story with the sticky plasma grenades.

It also offers a new way of handling one of *Halo*'s trickiest challenges: opponents who have got behind the wheel of a vehicle. Armor Lock charges up an EMP that fires as soon as the button is released, frying any nearby machinery. Alternatively, with careful timing the ability can be activated just as a Warthog or Ghost is about to run you down, turning the would-be victim into an immovable roadblock.

These are all pre-existing systems, and problems that have other solutions, but the new Abilities open the design space up further. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they've appeared, in some form, in both *Halo* games produced since Bungie left the series – the dev's parting gift that keeps giving.

Another of *Reach*'s inventions, one which has proved rather less immutable, is Invasion mode. It's the finest of the game's dizzying array of multiplayer options. Like in most multiplayer shooters, dying and respawning can become something of a churn in *Halo*, especially with the number of grenades bouncing around. After losing a few hours to deathmatches, it can all start to feel a little pointless. Invasion tries to address that by replacing the usual numerical scores with a simple narrative structure. The aliens took your MacGuffin – get it back. Or, alternatively: the humans are trying to break into your base and steal your MacGuffin – stop them.

The mode breaks down into phases. Each team starts with only one portion of the map unlocked and limited tools at its disposal. As the attackers push forward, more will open up. More map, more vehicles, more loadouts with different abilities to choose from. This keeps each game fresh, and lends some tangible worth to every kill or death because it's advancing – or hindering – a simple story the teams tell together. Now, though, this mode is mostly a historical footnote. Invasion hasn't been picked up by any of *Reach*'s 343-developed sequels. And revisiting the game's online matchmaking today, with the final holdouts clustering around the basic Team Slayer mode, there aren't enough players for even a single game of Invasion.

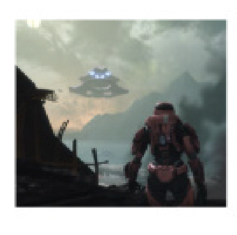
Like much of *Reach*, Invasion felt like it was looking forward, not only to the future of its own series but also those of the shooters it influenced, before Bungie left the genre behind to create its MMORPG hybrid. In this way, at least, the concept

GOES BACK TO THE BEGINNING TO FIND NEW WAYS TO DELIVER ON THE PROMISE OF THE GAME THAT STARTED IT ALL

***Halo*'s collection of toys, from lead-spitting assault rifles to plasma grenades and glowing alien tanks hovering just off the ground, has lost none of its magic**



A story featuring multiple Spartans, as well as the advancement of real-world technology, let *Reach* increase the scale of *Halo*'s battles



FEATURE CREEP

Beyond the campaign and multiplayer, *Reach* packages together disparate features reflecting trends when it was made and indicating where games might have been headed. Firefight is a cooperative horde mode where players work together, sharing a pool of lives and the occasional ordnance drop, to defend a point from waves of enemies. Theater's replay editing tool seems to prefigure the next generation's emphasis on share buttons and photo modes, and acknowledges *Halo*'s strong machinima community. That focus on user-generated content shines through in Forge mode, which lets you customise maps and create your own game modes, shareable through an in-game browser. None are unique to *Reach*, but it was the first time all three appeared in a single *Halo* title.



***Reach* is less successful when it strays from the core *Halo* loop – like this jaunt into space for a brief dogfighting setpiece**

lives on – most recently, in *Battlefield V*'s Grand Operations mode. This feels like part of *Reach*'s attempt to close the gap between multi- and singleplayer, something Bungie would go on to do in a very different way with *Destiny*. It is most obvious in the campaign's levels, almost all of which are recycled for competitive multiplayer or the cooperative Firefight mode. Far from being a sign of rushed development – even if *Reach* was made alongside *Halo 3: ODST* – it feels like a conscious decision.

It means every major combat arena in the game, whether you're fighting AI-controlled aliens or humans on the other end of an internet connection, is built to be approached in multiple ways. Each is a miniature sandbox, packed with nooks and crannies to explore, weapons tucked away on high ledges, vantage points and hiding spots. In the campaign, you generally approach these spaces before enemies are aware of your presence, giving you time to pick a solution to the puzzle it presents. Will you charge in with the half-full weapons you've already got, or sneak around the edges to scoop up the waiting sniper rifle and Active Camouflage pick-up?

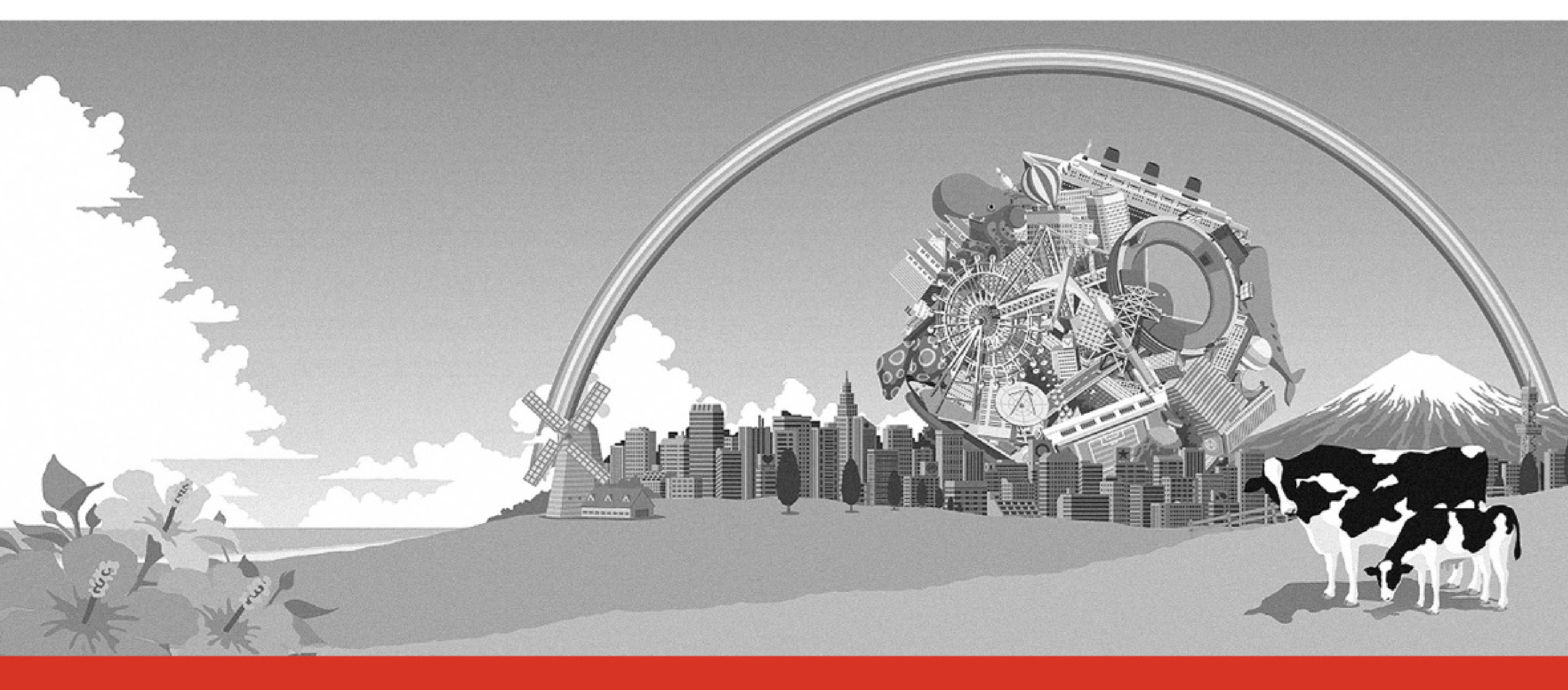
The systems connecting *Halo*'s weapons, abilities and other tools mean that each approach feels fundamentally different. Stumbling across a shotgun (or a Drop Shield, or an enemy Elite wielding a plasma sword) has a palpable effect on the way you play. It feels designed for replaying – an endless loop of that famous '30 seconds of fun' – which in multiplayer, is exactly what happens. It's the core of all the *Halo* games that led to this point, but also a precursor to the design of much of *Destiny*.

It's tempting to draw a comparison between Noble Team's hopeless last stand, and Bungie taking a final run at the traditional firstperson shooter structure before leaving it behind for a more lucrative framework, one that hooks players in with the promise of persistence and ever-increasing numbers. But *Reach* is, evidently, a game made on the developer's own terms. A swansong that goes back to the beginning, finds new ways to deliver on the promises of the game that started it all, and tries to establish a future divergent from the one Bungie will be building itself – even if some of those ideas never actually get taken up by those it hands the series off to. ■

Multiplayer maps that aren't lifted from the campaign are either remakes or blank Forge worlds. The latter, sadly, take precedence in current matchmaking







Katamari Damacy Reroll

Developer Namco **Publisher** Bandai Namco Games **Format** PC, Switch **Release** 2004

We are happy to confirm that *Katamari Damacy* is still essentially perfect. Oh, don't get us wrong: it's a right old mess a lot of the time, the current-gen tart-up of *Reroll* simply updating the graphics and leaving everything else as is, warts and all. The controls are still idiosyncratic in the extreme, with certain moves, particularly the dash, only being performed when the engine feels like it, as if the mechanisms beneath the game's madcap surface are being handled by The King Of All Cosmos himself. The physics can still be a bit strange, bouncing you harshly off things you look like you should be able to roll up no problem, or trapping you in passageways that look plenty big enough. And it's showing its age, sure – we can't remember the last game we played that had no autosave whatsoever. But absolutely none of that matters today, just as none of it mattered in 2004 when the game first landed on shelves.

Playing *Katamari Damacy* with the benefit of 15 years of hindsight shows just how influential it has been on the wave of independent games that have followed in its wake. While developed and published by Namco, Keita Takahashi's breakout game is shot through with what we think of these days as the indie spirit: it is playful and tremendously funny, deeply weird and a game with real heart. It is about the environment, about tidying up a messy world. Yet it is also about a gigantic father's withering disappointment in his miniature son, and about the noises cats make when you forcibly attach them to a sticky ball made of drawing pins, chairs, mousetraps and instant noodles.

That wry, quirky, whimsical sense of humour that felt so novel at the time is, in 2019, just one of many games to plough the same furrow. The riot of colour and noise that so stuck out in 2004 is now a calling card for the entire independent movement. Even creator Keita Takahashi, still toiling away on *Wattam* at San Francisco studio Funomena, is these days merely part of the scene that this game did so much to help inspire. And the music? Well, that's the exception that proves the rule. It's never been matched.

That *Katamari Damacy* has lost a little of its impact is no surprise, and no great loss either; in its place it has taken on a certain weight, the gravitas of an old trailblazer reborn. It has lost none of its magic in 15 years, but has gained status instead, the quintessential indie game that arrived before indie games even really existed. As a great man once said: dazzling. We feel a swoon coming on. ■



#329
January 31

